

An illustration of a man in a canoe on a river. The man is shirtless, wearing a blue loincloth, and is paddling with a long wooden paddle. He is looking back over his shoulder towards the viewer. The canoe is made of woven reeds or similar material. The river is dark with some white water at the stern. The background is a vibrant sunset or sunrise with warm colors like orange, yellow, and red. There are some trees and foliage on the left bank.

THE SPEED OF LIFE

An Illustrated Novel

James Victor Jordan

The Speed of Life



An Illustrated Novel
By James Victor Jordan

Praise for *The Speed of Life*

From the courtroom to the swamp primeval to the underpinnings of the universe, James Jordan takes us on a wild ride. A hugely ambitious and thoroughly enjoyable triumph of a first novel. All I can say is "Bravo!"

T.C. Boyle Author of *The Tortilla Curtain*.

I hugely enjoyed this remarkable novel. It blends human courage & cruelties with solid astrophysics and with Seminole culture & mythology – resulting in a richness that held me tightly in its grip.

Kip S. Thorne Winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Physics.

The Speed of Life is a fast-paced, character-rich, thought-provoking novel that takes the reader from the heart of Western philosophy and civilization to the heart of millennial America. A fine storyteller, James Jordan knows his characters and where all their secrets are buried, and something more—the hope still strong in their restless, striving hearts. A remarkable debut.

Aram Saroyan winner of the William Carlos Williams award for best poetry collection.

The Speed of Life, by James Victor Jordan, is a ground-breaking, scientific/philosophical novel wrapped in a Carl Hiaasen-flavored thriller. Jordan relates cutting-edge theoretical physics to ancient Seminole shamanistic practices and produces a credible explanation of why and how old magical methods may have tangible effects in our world. At the same time, this novel is sparklingly contemporary, bright and crisp around the edges of its plot, and ingenious in braiding elaborate story lines to bring an extraordinary cast of characters together. And it fires itself forward at a break-neck velocity; this is not a book you will want to put down.

Madison Smartt Bell, winner of the Pen/Faulkner Award and National Book Award finalist for *All Souls Rising*.

What happens when a horrendous crime threatens a mother's love for her son? An old Florida family and those in their orbit get caught in a torrent of passion, a deadly legal system, and the mythology of the Everglades, which runs as deep as this story does. Propulsive, evocative, beautiful writing.

Tom Holland, screenwriter of *Psycho II*, writer-director of *Fright Night*, *Child's Play*, Stephen King's *Thinner*

"Impressive . . . Descriptions . . . are primarily images that Jordan sears onto the pages." **Kirkus Reviews**

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Cover Design and illustration in collaboration with Eric Savage, Savage Creative
www.savagecreative.com

Title page of Part VII design and illustration in collaboration with Loraine Hall.

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ISBN number: 978-1-7325143-1-7

Follow your own star and you cannot fail to reach your destination.

Spoken by Ser Brunetto Latino to the pilgrim Dante as they walked by the Phlegethon River of souls boiling in blood toward the Great Cliff above the Eighth Circle of Hell.

Inferno Canto XV: 54-56

By Dante, Translated and paraphrased by James Victor Jordan

We will see that, like a particle, the universe doesn't have just a single history, but every possible history, each with its own probability; and our observations of its current state affect its past and determine the different histories of the universe . . .

Page 183, *The Grand Design* by Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow. Permission to use this quote graciously granted by Professor Mlodinow.

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.*

*In the dark-blue sky you keep,
And often through my curtains peep,
For you never shut your eye
Till the sun is in the sky.*

From the 1806 poem, *The Star*
By Jane Taylor

Dedication

For my wife Andrea Zinder, my sun and my stars, for her inspiration, for lighting my path, for her tireless reading and rereading the manuscript, for helping me keep my sentences honest and this story true.

Contents

Part I Estella

#MeToo

Rough Justice

Part II Andrew

Betty Mae

Charlotte Crow

Billie

Part III Georges

Twentieth Century Fox

Aphelion

Father's Day

Dressed to Kill

Part IV Ras

The Lineup

Waiting for the Sun

The Unveiling

Part V Merchants of Justice

Ismael

Sir Walter Raleigh

Ryan

Part VI Al and Hailey

Victim of Love

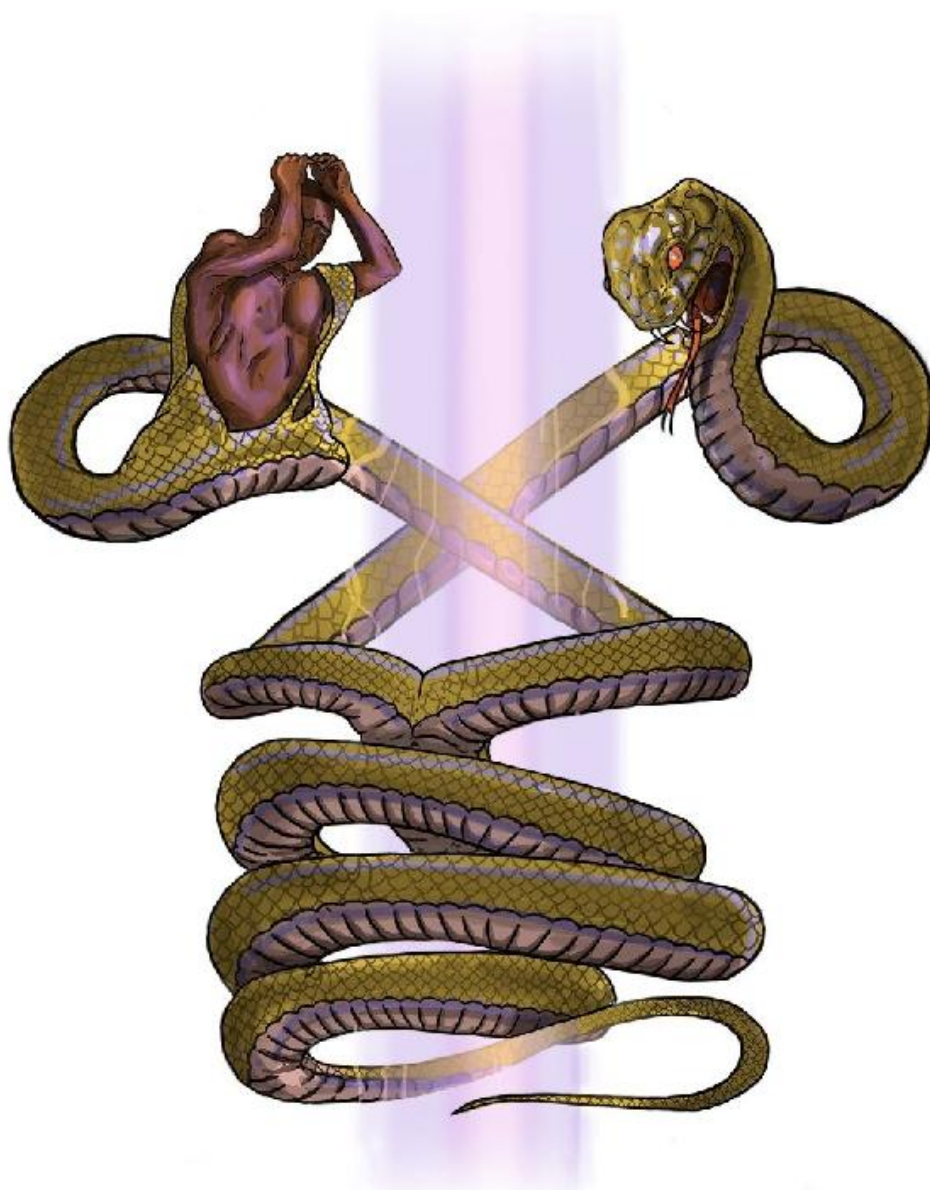
A Friend of the Devil

Part VII The Circle of Jupiter

A Warped Side of the Universe

Perihelion

Part I Estella



#MeToo

Andrew's going to the beach, looking good, shades covering his brown eyes, wearing his hair too short. On his way out the door, he says, "Be home before sundown, Momma." He's not allowed to drive at night. The latch clicks, and he's gone.

My balcony – my refuge when I weary from the demands of meting out justice – is cantilevered over a garden catching the light of the late-afternoon sun dancing and splashing over double hibiscus, second-bloom wisteria, and wild myrtle. I sip a lemon daiquiri. A fragrance of honeysuckle wafts in the air. A ruby-throated hummingbird flits from flower to flower to flower on a bottlebrush bush. In the rose beds, a golden rat snake crushes the last breath from a squealing young squirrel. A turkey vulture, majestic in flight, repulsive in sight, cawing, its fishhook-tipped talons extended like the fingers of an open hand, flaps its wings—spanning six feet—slowly, gracefully, as it descends to the upper fronds of a stately cabbage palmetto.

Yesterday, when I cross-examined the defendant – formerly revered as "The Queen" by her elderly clients – her crown rested uneasy as she stammered, contradicted herself, and failed to reconcile her testimony with the story she'd told on direct. The incredulity of the jurors was palpable, an unmistakable harbinger of a loose swift sword. Her victims' life savings were invested in a collapsed Ponzi scheme that paid for her chartered-jet excursions to Lake Como and ski vacations in Gstaad. The satisfaction of her victims with the judgment will be transitory, a brief respite from their anguish. But to turn the other cheek is to ignore moral imperative, and to disregard morality is to court extinction.

This judge is fond of metaphor. A trial is a jigsaw puzzle, she told the jurors. Each piece of the puzzle is a piece of evidence. There is no order in which the pieces of the puzzle must be assembled. But you can't see the puzzle's entire picture until you have all the pieces. When all the evidence is presented, you will have all the pieces of the puzzle. Then following my instructions, it will be your job to put the puzzle together. You can only reach a proper decision after you've seen the entire picture.

No one believes that jurors will wait until they've seen and heard all the evidence before they make up their minds. Instructing jurors to keep an open mind, like the instruction to disregard what you just saw or heard, pays homage to one of the great fictions of Anglo-American law. But the judge's metaphor gets it right because any quest for the truth – in science, in philosophy, or in literature as well as in the law – should consider and weigh all available evidence and test every reasonable hypothesis with the greatest possible objectivity. Considering what's at stake in a criminal trial – or in a human drug trial for that matter – a failure to be objective and impartial would be— well criminal.

Well before we lived in a world of sound bites and subliminal messaging, people usually made snap subjective decisions about matters of significance rather than taking the time and making the effort to form reasoned, objective, and empirically founded ones. This is human nature stemming from cultural and religious indoctrination that begins in early childhood, an evolutionary development that fostered survival for our early ancestors. Today it leads to xenophobia and other forms of intolerance. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of my mother teaching me this lesson.

At the dawn of humanity, when one of our ancestors saw another person approaching, failure to promptly determine if that person was a friend or foe could be fatal. In this circumstance our early ancestor would have to make a swift decision: hurl a rock or a spear before the other person could, run, or greet the stranger. Most often, this decision was based upon whether the stranger looked like herself. This explains why the call to bar immigrants from our shores rather than benefit from multiculturalism resonates with many of our citizens. Xenophobia stems from primitive instincts. As a person of mixed race – part Seminole, part black, part white – this terrifies me. There aren't very many people who look like me, or like Andrew, whose father was also of mixed race.

No one on my jury harbors even an iota of doubt about the Queen's guilt. You can see that in the way they look at her and her lawyers. You can see it in the way they look at me. The trial isn't over, but the Queen has already earned her verdict of guilty. Fortunately, in the Queen's case, even though all the evidence hasn't been presented, the jury's got it right.

To celebrate, I go shopping for that pair of Jimmy Choos I've been wanting. Money can't buy you love. But it can buy you shoes, and shoes

won't break your heart.

When I return from Saks, the sun is setting behind the Everglades, drawing dusk over the falling light of another day. Andrew isn't home; he hasn't called. Whatever the reason he's late – he's hurt, he's stoned, he's been arrested again – the news won't be good.

I call. No answer. I leave voice mail. "Andrew?" I'm dispirited but my voice is a soothing breeze in the eye of a hurricane. "Your probation officer could call . . ." I send a text.

Waiting, I vacuum, dust, and polish. Every crystal in the dining room chandelier glistens, refracting the light, breaking it into vibrant spectrums of twilight. My ivory-white soft-leather sofa smells new; my bird's-eye maple dining-room table, chairs, sideboard, and buffet smell like Pine-Sol; the lavender, mauve, and eggshell-white tiles on the bathroom and kitchen floors and counters smell like chemical flowers. The condo is a photo op for *Good Housekeeping*.

Almost.

I've left open the French doors leading to the balcony; the golden snake, a bulge in its midsection, nestles in plush piles of white carpet. Providence. Nature has sent me a companion.

A terrarium, a home unused since Andrew freed his pet snake years ago, now houses Providence and the promise of a rat later in the week.

Still no word from Andrew.

I do my laundry and then his, folding his twenty-eight-inch-waist jeans. He's just turned twenty, but I remember him insisting that we teach him to hunt soon after his father died; he was only six.

"I have to protect you," he said.

His grandmomma taught him the ways of her Seminole and African ancestors— respect for the earth and his elders. When he was twelve, he could survive on his own in the Everglades.

He was sixteen when he graduated from high school, where he won places on the debate and track teams and a black belt in taekwondo. He was nineteen when he graduated from college. Imagine my aspirations for my brilliant son. Imagine my incredulity when he was charged with possession of LSD with intent to sell.

He's left his room tidy, his bed made, no clutter, as a well-mannered, overnight guest would upon departing from the home of his host. I wonder

if he intends to return. But no. He wouldn't leave without a word. I don't feel better knowing this.

On my coffee table is a novel I've been meaning to read: *The Lovely Bones*. Misty Rabin, my best friend, says it's all the rage, as if rage were a good thing. My boss, Aurora Goldin, has also recommended it. It's a good time to read a page-turner, but soon the words blur and I'm remembering the afternoon I visited Andrew in jail.

As a federal prosecutor, I was no stranger to the county detention center. But before visiting Andrew there, when questioning a suspect or informant, I'd only been in the austere but immaculate inmate interrogation rooms enclosed within institutional-green walls with an armed deputy sheriff with an unmistakable countenance of menace nearby. The visitor facilities were different.

We sat on a filthy hard-rubber bench bolted to a gray picnic table in a gritty courtyard. The strung-out inmates were a lower class of criminal than the ones I prosecute.

A woman with a pincushion face and the word *DEVIANT* tattooed on the back of her blubbery neck sat near a grizzled inmate – short white hair and a white handlebar mustache, sinewy, a serpent offering an apple to Eve tattooed on his arm. She tickled the old man's earlobe.

He slapped her hand away. "Stop it!"

"Oh, baby, who loves you?" she said.

"Jesus loves me."

"Jesus ain't going to post your bail," she said.

Andrew was thinner than a stalk of pussy willow.

"Where's Derek?" he said.

"We broke up."

"I'm sorry," he said. "What happened?"

"It was mutual. Have you had other visitors?" I said.

"Billie Bower came by yesterday. He wasn't himself. I think this place freaked him out."

Billie Bower. Andrew's best friend, two years older, a surrogate big brother. He'd become a body builder, fastidiously following a healthy diet, always in training. A Seminole. An upstanding young man. I imagined how angry Billie must be with Andrew for poisoning his body with LSD, for possessing such a large quantity that he was charged with intent to sell.

"You've probably disappointed him," I said.

Andrew's expression didn't change.

"Why haven't you posted bail?" I said.

An inmate – mid-thirties, the type of guy who, if wearing a suit, could pass as a stockbroker – smelling of hair oil and fried food stopped in front of us. He was muscular, five inches taller, fifty pounds heavier than Andrew.

"Hello, Andrew boy! Who's the babe?"

Andrew stood.

The man smacked his lips.

"Keep moving, mister," I said.

"I can do that," he said, thrusting his hips to and fro Elvis Presley style. "Inside of you."

"Fred, don't," Andrew said. "You'll get hurt—"

"I'd like her to try."

I pride myself for my lightning repartee but before I could speak, Andrew scissor kicked the man, sending him to the pavement, which was covered with soot and cigarette butts. Blood dripped from his lower lip, his cheek smudged. The creep lay on the ground, groaning, holding his knee.

Two punks approached—The taller had a frozen, unblinking eye. With his good eye, he winked. "You want to kick me, *cholo*?"

With the heel of his palm, the shorter man struck his friend on the back of his head.

"¿Qué harías si su mama?" To Andrew he said. "*Tú tienes huevos. Háblame mas tarde.*" They moved on.

"I can get drug diversion," Andrew said.

My neck was stiff, my shoulders tight. "For dealing?"

"I'll have to take randomly ordered drug tests." He paused. "You'd have to sponsor me, let me live with you, and agree probation officers can search the condo any time."

I felt a wave of relaxation. "Good, that's good," I said. "You need help. And you won't get it here."

I abandon the novel, mute the TV, channel surf through pointless, absurd images. What the hell am I doing? Derek channel surfed, and it drove me nuts. But when he held me, reassured me when I awoke shivering in the despair of deep night – "It's only a dream, Estella, only a dream" – my anxiety was soothed. I wish he were here.

Derek – his body toned by hours well spent in the gym, his sandy hair blending with gray at his temples – says he still loves me. When the FBI assigned him to one of my cases, he was separated, and I was on the rebound, too. After a year, I knew he'd eventually go back to Kathi and his kids. When I broke up with him, that's exactly what he did. The jerk.

Granted: Derek had failed a fundamental test of devotion. But compared to Andrew's father, Karl, Derek was a poster child of reliability.

I fell in love with Karl when I was fourteen, a few months after my father was killed in combat. A year later, when I was pregnant with Andrew, I discovered that Karl was also sleeping with Claudia, a girl my age. Karl was charged with statutory rape.

Before the trial, Claudia's family moved to Virginia and her parents wouldn't let her return. So the state attorney said I'd have to testify to protect other girls. But that's not why I did it. I was nursing Andrew, expelled from high school, depressed, and blind with rage. I did it for myself, for raw, rank revenge.

Karl was my father's step-brother, younger by ten years. They weren't related by blood. But when the judge pronounced a sentence of twelve years, he said Karl was guilty of incest. As he was handcuffed in the courtroom, I was thunderstruck by the reality of what I'd done, and in paroxysms of tears, I cried as I had when my father died.

Counselors said that I was looking for my father in Karl. Of course, I didn't believe them. Karl and I had simply fallen from different stars, landing on earth in each other's arms.

I was taking Andrew to school when I last saw Karl alive. Wearing only his undershorts, he was bathing with rags and a garden hose in the side yard of my apartment complex. The night before, violating the terms of his parole, he'd shown up drunk, bellicose, and tried to push his way in, but I blocked the door.

Andrew screamed, "Don't fight! Don't fight!"

Karl said he was hungry. I gave him twenty dollars.

The next day, we found Karl sprawled on his back in the carport in the unmistakable throes of rigor mortis, his mouth agape, his eyes wide open, his frozen face a rictus of terror, mirroring the horror that instantly transformed Andrew's face. An overdose, the coroner said. If only I'd let him in, fed him, gotten him help. No one said it was my fault, but I blame myself anyway.

This morning I woke up at five and ran six miles. Now, eighteen hours later, I'm exhausted. I brush my hair, which falls below my shoulders. Not bad for thirty-six, I decide: five-eight, one hundred twenty pounds.

But perfection requires diligence. The ends are split. I make a mental note: Estella, get a trim. Maybe I should wear it up; maybe I should cut off six or seven inches instead of only one, or bob it. A new look is what I need—a new me.

I lie on my bed dressed in powder-blue sweats. In their final moments, fragments of light beamed by stars long since dead stream through cracks in the Venetian blinds and flicker on the ceiling. Arcs of shooting stars blaze across the South Florida nighttime sky.

I doze, wake up, doze. My neighbor flushes his toilet, the pipes gurgle. I've never gotten used to it. A disharmonic hum of the refrigerator blends with a high-pitched whine from my computer. I vow to move, get a place with a view of Biscayne Bay, a place without a bedroom for Andrew. A new life.

I think about sending the Queen to prison. I feel better.

I doze again, sleep fitfully at first, then fall into a slumber so deep that my dreams become hypnotic, as if I've been drugged, my body struggling to move in slow motion through liquid glue. Or am I dreaming? It's a dream, I tell myself, an erotic dream. How long has it been since I made love to someone, since someone made love to me?

Hands caress my face, neck, breasts, the backs of my legs, and I caress the hands with my body as they caress me. Sweet breath, subtle cologne. Nice. I try to open my eyes. I want the feelings to be real, to be held, to be loved. But the more strenuous my efforts to awaken, the deeper the dream becomes and the more erratic my sleep.

Hands slip under my sweatpants.

"Derek?" I say.

Hot breath on my neck.

"Shut up." A British accent.

I gasp.

A fist slams into my mouth, shattering bones, exploding colors. I spit blood and slivers of broken teeth in a shriek I don't recognize as my own. The face of a man emerges from purple shadow, on his forehead a crimson scar glows in moonlight. Young. Buck teeth. Blond. Ponytail.

"Andrew owes me," he says. "Understand?"

My jaw ablaze, I understand nothing.

He pulls my sweatpants down around my calves, clutches my hair, pulling my head backward, squeezing a breast.

I sock his stomach, hit his face, first his eye, then his jaw, knocking him back. But he still holds my hair, and as he falls off the bed, he yanks hard, pulling me after him. My head strikes the corner of the bed frame, tearing my scalp.

The room whorls as if I'd had too much to drink. I wobble as I try to scramble, wanting to get to my dresser, top drawer, my father's Glock 17, 9 mm semi-automatic. But my ankles tangle in my sweatpants, and I stumble. He jumps on me, knocks me to the floor where blood drips onto the carpet from the gash on my skull. Pain sears my chest. A broken rib—or two. I can't breathe. A punctured lung?

He presses the end of a gun barrel against my neck.

"Get up," he says.

His forearms, one tattooed with the word *NIRVANA*, are massive— like a home-run hitter's. He's shorter than me, solid, one seventy-five. An eye puffy, pink turning to purple. It's my father's gun he's pointing at me.

"You want money? Take it . . . my purse . . . on the dresser," I say.

"What do you think I am? A thief?" He spits on me. "Strip."

I hesitate, unsteady on my feet, my bedroom spinning around and around, faster and faster. He cocks the gun, his hand steady as a surgeon's. I hold onto my bed as I step out of my sweatpants.

"Your shirt," he says.

I pull my sweatshirt over my head.

"Sweet," he says, kicking off his shoes, unzipping his pants, letting them fall. No underwear, he's enormous, uncircumcised, erect.

Hot acid rises in my throat. I'm going to vomit.

"How much?" I say. "I'll pay what Andrew owes you."

"Yes, you will," he says, rotating the barrel of the gun in a small circle. "On the bed, on your stomach."

The second hand on my nightstand clock sweeps the dial in slow motion.

"Spread your legs," he says, pressing the gun barrel into the nape of my neck. "Wider!"

Thirty seconds. Forty. Sixty. Eighty. My personal best swimming one hundred meters, an eerie dissimilarity between then, when the seconds flew,

and now, each one punctuated by terror, promising distinct new sources of pain.

He climbs on to the bed, his knees between mine, my father's gun unwavering is still in his hand.

My breath erratic, I struggle to get out words. "Will you use a rubber?" I say. "Please."

"Will you kiss me," he says. "*Puhleeze?*"

Blood trickles down the side of my face. He plays with my hair, then he jerks my head back and all I see is the ceiling blurred by droplets of warm blood dripping into an eye. I hyperventilate, pray he'll hurry, get it over with.

"This is from Andrew," he says.

Suddenly, his weight shifts. A fuse of pain sears up my spine from my anus to my brain.

In the blush of a silver half-moon, dark edges soften. In the grip of ague, in silence as still as a courtroom before the reading of a verdict, I run my tongue over broken teeth.

His smell, rank as urine, is on me. In my vanity mirror I see blood smeared on the back of my legs, my face, my comforter. I don't turn on the lights. I don't know why.

On my dresser under Andrew's wallet is a note. ANDREW WAS RIGHT. U R A GREAT FUCK! CALLING COPS WOULD BE UNWISE.

I listen. No animate sounds. I wish there were.

My thoughts jumbled, my shotgun loaded, my naked-broken body carries it and creeps down the stairs, a tidal wave of pain held temporarily, mercifully in abeyance by homicidal rage.

Andrew's room is ransacked; my study's untouched. I descend another flight. The kitchen? The dining room? Spotless.

Suddenly, my head is squeezed in the grips of a vise that tightens until I lose sight. I grab hold of the bird's-eye maple sideboard, struggle for breaths so shallow I fear I'll suffocate. When sight returns, my breathing merely labored, I think of calling my neighbor. He must have heard me scream, yet he didn't call the police. Son of a bitch. I call Derek.

Kathi answers his cell phone. I struggle to keep an even voice.

"Christ, Estella," she says. "It's four o'clock."

I don't want to cry, don't want Kathi to hear me cry. But I do.

“Estella, what’s wrong?”

“I’ve been . . .” What? “Raped.”

Like a hunter tracking wounded prey, I follow a trail of blood up the stairs, every step slicing through me like a razor of ice.

In my bathroom, I see a sticky-white glob in a knot of my hair. I throw up, then cut off the gooey clump, cutting, cutting, letting my hair fall— first in handfuls and then in strands onto the chemical-flower-smelling tile floor. Blood seeps from my scalp.

I turn on hot water in the shower. The bathroom fills with steam. I step in, the water almost scalding, but I find this out later. I scrub my stomach, my ass. Blood drips between my legs, swirls in rivulets into the drain.

Derek and two uniformed cops, guns drawn, burst in. Why are they here? What’s happened?

Derek turns off the water, covers me with a towel. “Estella?” he says, “Estella? Estella?” as if he isn’t sure it’s me.

I choke out the words: “Andrew, Andrew.”

Rough Justice

I awake among cascades of roses, azaleas, and orchids, the fragrance of heliotrope. My mother, though she's petite, wears a floral muumuu and no jewelry: for her an unusual statement of fashion. She's reading, which is not surprising. Usually it's astronomy or philosophy: arcane, remote, dense, boring. The hard- or-soft-cover book she'd habitually carried for as long as I can remember was replaced by a tablet years ago. But today she has a hard-cover book propped up on her thin lap. At least she's not plugged in to her iPod, sparing me thoughts of her atrocious taste in music.

Derek, his new partner, Edgar, and uniformed cops stand just inside the room, talking softly.

"Where's Andrew?" I say. The words muffled. My jaw wired shut. My head bandaged. My neck braced. A tight corset under my nightgown, an IV in the back of my hand.

My mother is at my side, caressing my face. She's holding *Shamanistic Psychotherapy*, the last book written by my dear, long-since departed aunt, Charlotte Crow Abiaka. Why is my mother reading it again? Why is she reading it now?

"In jail," a cop says.

I'm lightheaded, muddled. Morphine.

"What charges?" I say.

"Hold on, Estella." My mother's authoritative voice. She faces the cops, raises an open hand to shoulder level, her palms toward them. "No questions." She's a commanding presence for a tiny woman.

"It's okay," I say.

"It's not okay," my mother says. "Those were the doctor's orders."

My mother has a look on her face I recognize all too well. Someone could get hurt, but Derek now stands between my mother and the cops.

"Betty Mae, let me handle this, please." He knows what the cops don't know: my mother can be dangerous. He says to the cops, "Get out."

"Conspiracy to commit rape," a cop says.

"We'd like to ask you a few more questions, Ms. Verus," another cop says.

More questions?

“No Andrew way,” I say. “He couldn’t, wouldn’t. Who’s the . . .” I search for the words. “. . . alleged . . . victim?”

The men stare at me with incomprehension. Moisture wells in my mother’s eyes. With surprising alacrity, Derek and Edgar are herding the cops out of my hospital room.

“Don’ worry, Momma,” I say. “Andrew be home before sundown.”

How do I reconcile what’s happened with the truth? I’ll talk to Andrew, then bury myself in work. But my boss, Aurora, has other ideas.

Aurora’s been my mentor since I went to work for the Justice Department right out of law school, and we have a lot in common, especially considering our age difference, seventeen years, and that she’s white and Jewish and I’m half white, half black Seminole, and accept Jesus as my savior as my father did. We have a bond, a deep bond that forms an essence of who we are. We don’t often talk about it, but it’s always there. Her father and my father were military pilots, naval aviators, killed in combat while piloting their aircraft. This happened to Aurora’s father when she was fourteen. And it happened to my father when I was fourteen.

Now she stands at my bedside, dark, penetrating eyes, burnt-brown hair coiffed, ebony peep-toe stilettos, wearing a double strand of cultured-black pearls over a gray silk blouse, a single-breasted charcoal linen suit, dark-red fingernails and toenails.

I’m not sure I like her new hair color: almost black with a hint of lavender. Maybe it’s a reflection of the white-hot sunlight blending with the purple cast of the fluorescent light in my hospital room. Maybe all my senses are impaired by the Vicodin that’s replaced the morphine drip.

Through my wired jaw I manage to say, “You rehearsing that outfit for my wake?”

“Nice work,” she says. “Already got yourself appointed fashion police.”

“I wish. They won’t let me wear my Jimmy Choos.”

“You bought them? Muted-metallic silver, slinky straps?”

So long ago. My body gives new meaning to feeling stiff. But I manage a nod.

“A shame. By next week they’ll be so last week. Best you let me take them for a test spin.”

“They’re for rent,” I say, “by the hour.”

“Is there still pain?” she says, “Physically?”

“I’m as good as a girl sustained by soup can be. Be back to work, be dancing in just a few days.”

“The doctors say at least two months medical leave.”

“No law against breaking doctors’ orders,” I say.

She takes my hand. “I’ve brought you a few books,” she says. “Your favorite authors: Annie Proulx, Margaret Atwood, and—” – she rummages through a bag of books she’s brought – “what’s his name, the award-winning novelist who’s acclaimed for writing about Vodou and shamans and the living and the dead living side by side?”

“Madison Smartt Bell,” I say. “But it’s more complicated than—”

“Forgive me,” she says, “I’m not being judgmental, but do you talk about that stuff in church?”

“What stuff?” I say.

She flips through the pages of one of Bell’s books she’s brought, *All Souls Rising*. She says, “You know, the loa, spirits, zombies—”

“Aurora, bring me some briefs,” I say. “I don’t have to be in the office to supervise the junior attorneys.”

“You can’t come back for a while,” she says.

Sadness surprises me. I want to cry but I won’t, and what’s with the crying anyway? The last time I wanted to cry was when I heard about Andrew’s drug dealing.

“Why?” I say. “Why can’t I work? I’m not the criminal.”

“We have to investigate,” she says.

Any attack on a law-enforcement officer is an attack on our system of justice. And prosecutors, like other law enforcement officers, are especially vulnerable to violence at the hands of criminals. But that has nothing to do with my privilege of participating in that system, of working to enforce the law, protecting our people, our constitutional liberties, our ways of life.

I say, “That’s ridiculous.”

“Debut your Jimmy Choos in Paris,” she says. “But check your e-mail.”

At least I can talk to Andrew. Or so I think. Andrew has counsel and they also have other ideas. Between his inheritances and his monthly stipend from the tribe, he can afford a good lawyer. He should have talked to me before retaining counsel.

He’s hired a Georges Bohem and a Connie Knight of Collins, Dickens & Swift, an ultra-white-shoe, ultra-expensive law firm. I know the members

of the criminal-defense bar, but I've never heard of Bohem or Knight. They must be very young, recently admitted to the bar, the top of their class at a prestigious law school. But the bottom of the totem pole at their firm. Andrew's hired the least experienced lawyers in the most expensive law firm in the state.

And what's the first thing these clowns have done to defend my son? They've had me served in the hospital with a temporary restraining order, prohibiting me from talking to him to ensure that his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination isn't compromised by undue influence. It's signed by the Honorable Pola Zielinski, the newest county judge. Figures. But I'll enlighten her, open her eyes to the injustice of the TRO, help her find her judicial bearings.

I must talk to Andrew, hear from him that his keys and wallet were stolen, explaining how the perp knew his name. I must hear from him that the perp finding my father's gun was coincidence. I devise my legal strategy and look forward to hearing this newbie judge rip these newbie lawyers a new one. Talking to his mother undue influence? This is a new low for the criminal-defense bar.

When I'm discharged from the hospital, I'll go to my mother's place where I grew up, a veritable mansion on Osceola Island in the Intracoastal Waterway between Miami and Miami Beach, a palace of beauty, of magic, of majesty.

Momma drives a Land Rover, but she's waiting for me in my father's '59 pearl-white Cadillac Eldorado convertible. It's nine-teen feet long, has spaceship fins and conical thrusters, visual velocity with a ride like floating on a cloud.

She refuses to part with this vestige of my father's flamboyance. "A great car," she says, "is like a spouse— 'til death do you part." My father's been gone for a long time. I'm more than twice as old now than I was when he was killed, older now than he was when he lost his life. He no longer inhabits the earth, but my mother loves him still and he still lives in my her heart, in her everyday memories, and in mine.

On the road, she turns on the radio.

Will you please turn off that hippie music," I say.

"'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds'?" she says. "Everyone likes the Beatles."

“Momma, it’s glorifying drugs. The girl with kaleidoscope eyes? She’s stoned, hallucinating on LSD.”

“‘Diamonds in the sky’ was a metaphor for the stars long before anyone knew anything about LSD,” she says. “The song is about not taking everything at face value. It’s about keeping an open mind to all possibilities, so you can distinguish between what’s real and what’s not.”

“I am so sick of hearing about the answers to everything being in the stars.” I turn my head to stare out the passenger window, try crossing my legs, which brings on an unexpected sharp pain in my hip.

My mother mellifluous voice breaks into song: *Twinkle twin-kle little star/How I wonder what you are.*

I turn my head to see her lips upturned, dimples formed by the smile spread across her face. I join her, singing the lullaby she so often sang putting me to bed when I was a child. I join in: *Up above the world so high/Like a diamond in the sky.*

“What would you like for dinner, dear?”

I tell her that I’ll stay at her place only for the night. In the morning, I’ll appear at the restraining-order hearing, then see Andrew in the lockup at the courthouse. Then I’ll go home and draft five-, ten-, and fifteen-year plans. But despite my desperate efforts to think, to plan, to strategize, that damned star tune – twinkle, twinkle – revolves in my mind like a carousel that can’t be stopped.

Though I know not what you are/Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

Getting ready for court the next morning, in the mirror I see my-self aged, anemic, skeletal. I could be a newly released prisoner of war, or a cancer victim, or both. I’d put on makeup, but my face is beyond repair. I cover the chopped-off hair that remains on my head with a Seminole scarf.

My mother wants to come with me to the hearing. “I want to see Andrew, too,” she says. I persuade her not to.

When I get to the courthouse, I find out that the presiding judge, Peter Lahat, has transferred Andrew’s case from Judge Zielinski to Judge Murray Rabin, the husband of my best friend, Misty. How is this possible? Murray had been a hard-hitting, give-no-quarter prosecutor. He’s loved in the State Attorney’s office, where he’s affectionately known as a hanging judge. Apparently, even though there are grounds, Andrew’s lawyers haven’t asked Murray to recuse himself. Is there no longer any supervision of

junior lawyers at Collins, Dickens? But this is a stroke of luck. Murray would never separate me from my son, a fact that any experienced lawyer in Miami-Dade County would know.

Andrew's prosecutor, Gnossos Poppodopolis, notorious for his ill-fitting toupees, greets me outside Murray's courtroom. His wig du jour, a blond mullet, tilts to one side, making his head look pointy. Under other circumstances, I'd have to hold back laugh-ter. But since the rape, nothing seems funny.

"Estella," he says, "how are you?"

"You tell me, Gnossos, how do I look?"

"I've seen you looking better."

Two beefy white women deputy sheriffs, dragging a sobbing young black woman wearing a county-detention-center jump suit, her hands cuffed to a chain around her waist, come out of the courtroom, pushing aside a frail black man— 75-year-old Abraham Washington Lincoln, a legendary civil rights lawyer and an elder statesman of the criminal-defense bar. Abraham wobbles then falls against an unusually handsome man wearing a navy pinstripe silk suit, who looks as if he's just stepped out of an ad in *GQ*.

The man, who has a rich shock of luster-black hair, helps Abe regain his balance and asks if he's okay.

I expect the deputies to stop, to apologize, but they keep walking. And so I take quick steps toward them with Gnossos at my elbow.

"Officers!" I say.

Now the deputies stop, pivot with their prisoner, look at me with menace. "You got a problem?" one of them says.

Never has a law-enforcement officer treated me with disrespect.

"Dolores," Gnossos says to the deputies. "This is Assistant United States Attorney Estella Verus."

"Sorry, Ma'am," Dolores says.

"And," Gnossos says, "the attorney you collided with is Abraham Lincoln."

The deputies look back to where Abe still stands by the courtroom doors but say nothing.

Then frog-marching their prisoner in the direction they'd been heading, one of them says to the other without pretense of effecting a whisper, "*Abraham Lincoln?*"

We return to where Abe is waiting. The lawyer who'd steadied him has entered the courtroom with a younger lawyer, a woman I'd guess was about my age. The older lawyer Abraham was knocked into appeared to be in his early forties, but short. Five, eight at most. The woman wore a fashionable designer suit. Lucy in the Sky would have envied the diamonds on her wedding band. Her watch, shoes, and briefcase were Cartier.

"You okay?" I say to Abraham.

Abraham says. "Almighty Jesus. Estella, what happened to you?"

I don't know why, but again I almost cry. Abraham puts his arms around me, pulls me to him in a lengthy warm hug. "May I pray for you?" he says.

I bite my lower lip to hold back the sobs and nod.

Abraham takes my hand, bows his head. "Dear Lord," he says. His tone is reverential, but I can't make out the rest of his words. He looks up at me, his eyes moist, and then he walks into the courtroom.

"Estella," Gnossos says, "Peter Lahat—"

"I saw the order," I say.

"Murray's the new judge because every other county judge recused himself. If you challenge Murray—"

"I know the rules, Gnossos. Murray's okay by me."

"Andrew's case will be transferred to Citrus County."

"I see," I say. "A county with no people of color."

Inside the courtroom, paneled with a cheap veneer of faux light oak, I feel claustrophobic. I'd forgotten how much smaller the county courtrooms are than the cavernous federal courtrooms with their marble floors and walls.

Abraham's client is charged with second-degree murder for stabbing a man during a bar fight. Abraham has filed a motion asking for discovery, information in the police files that the state attorney won't give him. Murray hears this matter first and denies Abraham's motion.

Then Andrew's case is called. Gnossos, his assistant counsel, Lisa Margolis, and I approach the counsel table and – this was a shock—so does the lawyer who'd caught Abraham and the woman who'd walked into court with him.

"Gnossos Poppodopolis and Lisa Margolis for the State, Your Honor," says Gnossos.

"Georges Bohem and Connie Knight of Dickens, Collins & Swift for defendant, Andrew Good-Eagle Godfrey," says Bohem.

It's more apparent to me than ever that my son needs me to help him find qualified counsel. The first thing I'll explain to Andrew is that any jury will hate these slick lawyers, flaunting their wealth.

I stand next to the prosecutors. "Estella Verus," I say, trying not to sound sarcastic, though I know I do. "The mother who's been temporarily enjoined from talking to her son."

"Ms. Verus and my wife are close friends," Murray says for the record. He looks at papers on the bench. "Ms. Verus, has Mr. Poppodopolis talked to you about your right to have me recused from presiding over this case?"

"He has, Your Honor," I say.

"If you ask me to recuse myself, I will. But if you don't, then once I make any substantive ruling, your right to challenge me will have been waived. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Your Honor. I don't challenge your jurisdiction. Your Honor, where is the defendant? He has a right to be here."

Connie Knight says, "Your Honor, the defendant waives his right to be present."

Murray says, "Ms. Verus? You oppose the defendant's motion?"

"Your Honor," I say. "I'm going to give the defendant legal advice. What he tells me will be protected by the attorney-client privilege; His Fifth Amendment rights will be secure." This strategy is foolproof.

"You will not be his attorney, Ms. Verus," Murray says, silver hair slicked straight back, still looking at papers on the bench. "It would be a conflict of interest. The defendant's motion for a preliminary injunction is granted. I'm entering a separate order disqualifying you as counsel, Ms. Verus."

Bohem says, "Your honor, I further move for an order of sequestration, that Ms. Verus, since she is a witness, be excluded from all proceedings except when she's called to testify or other-wise by court order."

Before I can gather my thoughts, utter a word, Murray says, "Granted."

"Your honor," I say, "I oppose that motion. I'd like to be heard."

"Ms. Verus," Murray says, "the motion is routine. There's nothing for you to say."

"But your honor," I say, "it's routine for trial proceedings. I've never heard of it used in a pretrial proceeding. It's unprecedented."

Murray looks at me. His pock-marked face I loved because he loves Misty, I no longer love. "These orders are in the best interests of the victim

and the defendant. Court is in recess.” Murray bangs his gavel.

The bailiff intones, “All rise.”

Murray gathers files and with them he leaves through the rear door in the courtroom, the entrance to his chambers.

Murray’s words, “the victim and the defendant,” hit me harder than the blow from the perp that broke my face.

Gnossos hands me a subpoena, ordering me to appear and testify at the preliminary hearing. Weakness in the back of my thighs, behind my knees. I grasp the counsel table, slide into a chair even though the hearing has just ended.

Bohem and his sidekick pack their briefcases. Gnossos walks around me to their side of the counsel table, congratulates Bohem, and offers a handshake. Bohem ignores the gesture and he and Knight turn their back on Gnossos and head toward the courtroom door. Gnossos says to their backs, “Hey, that’s uncalled for. Maybe that’s how you lawyers treat each other in Los Angeles but not here.” Then he looks at me. “The man needs a lesson in manners,” he says loudly. “We can see to that.”

The courtroom door shuts behind Connie Knight, who has followed Bohem out.

“Gnossos?” I say, managing to get back on my feet.

“Yeah, Estella?” he says, putting his file that was lying on the counsel table in his briefcase.

“Why were you kissing up to that snake-oil salesman?”

“Estella—” he says.

I’m in his face. “And why are you prosecuting my son? Serv-ing me with a subpoena?”

“I can’t expect you to be objective, Estella,” he says. “We’re prosecuting this case because we don’t want what happened to you to happen to my mother, my wife, my daughters, or any other woman.”

“That’s right!” Lisa Margolis pipes in gratuitously.

I’m stunned by her vehemence.

“You think your son, anyone’s son, could send a pervert to rape his mother?” I say.

Lisa Margolis gives me a haughty look.

“You think there are hordes of sons out there, roaming the county, conspiring to have their mothers raped?” I say. “Do you even have children?”

“Every perp we prosecute has a mother,” Lisa Margolis says. “Every one of those mothers tells us—”

“Enough,” Gnossos says. He gives Lisa Margolis a withering look. She gathers her things and heads for the courtroom door.

Gnossos says, “I’m sorry, Estella. May I refer you to a counselor, you know, someone who specializes in helping crime victims?”

I shake my head in frustration, rage, disbelief, denial, despair, profoundly sad.

Los Angeles? If Bohem and Knight are from L.A., then who’s their local counsel? I can’t get my head around it. My son is in jail, charged as an accomplice, aiding and abetting my rape, a matter of public record (though my name won’t be published), not unbridled conjecture. I won’t be able to look at him, hear him deny the allegations, provide explanations. I won’t have a clue about the strategy of his savvy-less lawyers. What if they won’t let him testify? How will I live with that, without knowing?

The bailiff hands me a note. Murray wants to see me in chambers.

When we’re alone I clench my fists. “Murray, you son of a bitch. I’ll appeal. And I’ll tell Misty. You can kiss off your sex life.”

Enfeebled, I sit on a dark-maroon button-pleated sofa, struggling to maintain my composure, repeating in my mind: I will not cry. I will not cry.

Tan-and-red volumes of the Southeast Reporter, ochre-and-gold volumes of the Florida Statutes Annotated, and dark-blue treatises on evidence fill floor-to-ceiling dark-oak bookcases. Murray’s black robes hang behind his massive dark-oak desk. Sunrays striking vertical blinds drawn three-quarters shut cast shadows like prison bars on the law books. I breathe oxygen-depleted air in the shrinking room.

Murray takes me to lunch, tells me that the state attorney, Gnossos Poppodopulis’s boss, wants Andrew to serve five to eight years in the same sex-offender block where his father once lived.

“Based on? An out-of-court statement of a rapist?” I say.

He turns his palms upwards, shrugs.

“Gnossos Poppodopulis,” I say. “Do you find him to be . . . arrogant?”

“Self-righteous. He’s on a self-appointed mission to deliver Old Testament justice,” Murray says. “Not a bad character trait for a prosecutor.”

“Who are those lawyers? Bohem and what’s-her-name?”

“First I’ve heard of them,” Murray says. “Polished. Expensive. You could call Hank Smythe-Russell over at Collins, Dickens. Ask him.”

“I thought of that,” I say. “But it doesn’t matter. I won’t testify. You can hold me in contempt.”

“Estella, you deserve a long vacation—abroad. Misty practically has her bags packed. Come back after the preliminary hearing. Without a witness, the state may have to dismiss.”

“Have you talked to Aurora?”

I detect a restrained smile on his lips.

“I can’t discuss that,” he says.

Providence is dead.

I bury her in the rose garden, where I find skin shed by another snake. Providence must have had a mate. Call it sentimental. Call it whim. Call it sanity bent by combat fatigue.

I’m not as strong as I thought. I can’t walk into my bedroom without visualizing the rape. I’ll desensitize, spend the first night sleeping in the den, my shotgun close by.

Back in my living room, I throw open the French doors leading to my balcony, hoping a breeze will refresh the stale air.

I toss the subpoena onto the coffee table. Think of burning it.

Andrew would not, could not conspire to have me raped. But my testimony could send him to prison, brand him a sex offender. Gnossos Poppodopolis will distort my testimony, using it to argue that only Andrew could have told the rapist I was home alone, only Andrew could have told the rapist where to find my father’s gun, and only Andrew could have assured the rapist that our neighbor is a chicken-shit who wouldn’t call the police. I’ve seen juries put away defendants on evidence more tenuous and arguments more attenuated.

And what are Andrew’s elitist lawyers going to do about it? Maybe they can explain how an Assistant United States Attorney can disobey a subpoena, even if she is the victim and the mother of the defendant. I swore an oath to uphold the law. Can I allow that oath to destroy my son?

I play Beatles’ CDs, *A Hard Day’s Night* and *Revolver*, kick back with a daiquiri. Soon it comes to me – just about every lyric – *working like a dog/sleeping like a log* – is cliché or – *I’ll make love to you/If you want me to* – inane. How did the Fab Four peddle that? The music of my parents’

generation, a less sophisticated, less discerning time: the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll of reckless self-indulgence. Taste in music must be generation skipping. The kids who made music popular in the sixties and seventies were probably too hopped-up to care about the lyrics.

But not all of them. Among those kids was my father, incinerated in a helicopter shot down in the Gulf War. There was no body, no good-bye. I try to picture him, but the only images I have are the photos my mother has framed or arranged in albums. Twenty-two-years ago he vanished. My actual memories of him are gone. I try remembering a day when I didn't miss him. I can't.

A glimpse of a large raptor, the whoosh of its wings, an eagle. It alights on the wrought-iron railing of my balcony, tail feathers and back to the garden, beak and unblinking eyes facing me, its size astonishing.

I reach for my phone, wanting to photograph the bird. But before I can, Providence's mate undulates into the room. He rises like a cobra poised to strike, then in a display of eukaryotic fission, he evolves into two snakes that coil in a double volute around a beam of brilliant transparent purple neon light. Andrew emerges from one of the snakes shedding his skin. He is naked, his own reddish-brown skin appears to be soft, flawless, shimmering as if reflecting the ethereal purple light. His face a portrait of the anguish of birth.

The snake, still coiled around the purple light, divides again into entwined golden serpents, tongues flicking, tails twitching until one of them becomes my father emerging nude from shed-ding snake skin.

Soon Karl, the rapist – his blond ponytail and bright bucked teeth reflecting the volutes purple light – Billie Bower, Derek, Edgar, my neighbor who didn't call the cops, the cops who burst into my bathroom, the cops who interrogated me, Abraham Washington Lincoln, Gnossos Poppodopolis, Georges Bohem, and Murray Rabin, all naked, crowd into the room. The rapist masturbates. I expect Derek or Andrew or my father or one of the cops to restrain him. Or Murray, a judge, for God's sake. But they just watch.

If only my mother were here. Misty. Aurora. Any woman.

The rapist draws his lips into a rabid smile that exposes an expanse of diseased gums, his breath fetid like his odor that lingered on me after the rape.

“Burn it,” he says, hissing in his sickly sweet British accent, reaching for the subpoena.

But Andrew, quicker, snatches the subpoena, hands it to me.

Whether this is a vision from my subconscious, a glimpse of an alternative reality, or exhaustion-induced hallucination, it’s too much. I push my way through the throng of naked men, slip my .38 revolver into its shoulder harness, and leave for my mother’s place.

In gridlock on U.S. 1, Derek calls. “We’re going to see a lot of each other.”

I finger the lapel of my suit jacket, caress the handle of my gun.

“You haven’t seen enough of me today?”

The driver behind me honks his horn.

“What are you talking about?” Derek says.

“You leave Kathi again?”

His voice deflates. “Aurora’s placed you under 24/7 protection.”

To safeguard me from the snake? Or from that low-life blast-ing his horn in the car behind mine?

“Derek, I’ll call you back.”

The guy behind me is early thirties, trimmed beard, suit, late-model gray Jaguar sedan. He gives me the finger. I pull forward, but he leans on his horn again. He’s picked the wrong moment on the wrong day to piss off the wrong woman. But what am I going to do? Unholster my gun, pull him out of his car, handcuff him to his steering wheel, jam the horn, activate the car alarm, and treat him to other virtuoso performances of road-rage retaliation?

I have no life. Aurora wants me out of the country, out of the way. This has something to do with Andrew, something she isn’t telling me. But no. If I know anything, I know Aurora deserves my trust. This is just Aurora being Aurora: concerned, overly protective, loving.

My mother calls. I tell her what happened in court, what Murray said during lunch. She suggests that we take a trip, camp in the Everglades for four or five weeks. That would make spend-ing eight hours with Derek jangling my nerves feel like a day on the French Riviera.

The part of my life I must rethink is men; there’s never been one I could depend on. Maybe I should be gay, go to a lesbian bar tonight. But looking as I do, even a man wouldn’t want me.

Maybe spending time with my mother is what I need. I can't be certain what she knows about men. She was never serious about a man after my father was killed. But she never got involved with a fuckup like Karl or a jellyfish like Derek.

Now she wants to take me into the swamp, eat what we kill. The last time she and I did that was decades ago, after my father was killed. We camped on cypress domes, hunted, fished, gathered roots and plant leaves. That soothed my grief, but I've refused to go back, rejecting her Seminole and African heritage, claiming for myself my father's white heritage, trying to live a white woman's life in a white woman's world.

"If you say yes," she says, "I'll visit Andrew and find out what you want to know."

I could draft a list of questions, teach her how to lead, how to follow up, conspire to violate the injunction.

"I can't let you do that, Momma, but let's spend a few weeks together in the Glades."

Traffic picks up; I'm going fifteen, twenty. Ten seconds pass, fifteen, twenty-five. "Momma? Momma?" She doesn't answer but she doesn't have to. I picture her face: a visage of joy masking a vision of profound sorrow.

In the Everglades, I stalk a wild boar. I've been looking for a sow no larger than 150 pounds, as the meat of a larger animal would be less succulent. But it's already late afternoon; I'm tired. This one is at least 250 pounds, five-inch yellow cutters. I've seen a charging boar gore a careless hunter, rip open his femoral artery, a reprise of Hemmingway's "Capital of the World." But I don't think about danger. I keep my mind on the hunt, think about quartering and field dressing the carcass.

Keeping my face to the wind, I steal to within thirty yards of where the old hog roots around, framed like a bull's-eye by the serried leaf of palmetto. I'm not distracted by mosquitoes, giant orchids, birds diving for gar, or manatees bobbing in the waters beyond the clearing.

I have the boar in the sights of my mother's 7.5-inch-barrel Ruger Redhawk .44 magnum. When he turns, I'll bring him down with a single bullet behind his shoulder. But then, like a predictable plot twist in popular fiction, the wind shifts. The hog faces me; I shoot. The bullet grazes the front of his shoulder, which is protected by thick hide, layers of fat, and a

clavicle of steel. Squealing, he charges. His pink eyes narrow, his nostrils flare. Buck teeth. Pony tail. Crimson scar. In the pig's face, I see the perp's face. *NIRVANA* obliterated as I aim and squeeze off the remaining shots rapidly but deliberately, methodically, shredding his skull into blood-drenched fragments. Pink-and-gray neural matter oozes from where his ears had been.

Homicidal thoughts. I don't like myself for having them, but they're better than the fear that I'm being followed, a canoe behind mine or waiting in ambush behind a mangrove, that in gatherings of red faces I see a white face, a menacing face, a hateful face—when I'm not expecting to see it, when it's not there.

My guilt, my sorrow combines with denial and rage. What happened? To me? To my son? What kind of a mother was I?

Yet I've gained self-knowledge, perspective in these past few weeks, allowing my mother to love me as I should have when my father was killed. I blamed her for Karl's incarceration even though it was my testimony that sent him to prison. I've told her I'll make amends, but she says she's perceived no insult, that I had understandable troubles in my teens.

Like me, my mother insists that Andrew did not, would not conspire to have me raped. And what's more, she insists that I've done nothing to warrant blame.

I've listened when she's played rock 'n' roll and enjoyed it, though I still have more admiration for the alternative rock bands of my generation – U2, Pearl Jam, Nine Inch Nails – musicians who had the character to avoid arrest and drug addiction. But whatever the differences in our musical tastes, my mother never was a flower child. She was a child of the flowers, a shaman.

The boar, dead before his body knew it, drops less than five yards from me. Pieces of his skull, snout, and brains leave a gory trail of shredded and shattered organic matter that moments before belonged to a living mammal. Adrenaline coursing through his body has turned his carcass into a feast for the gators, for the turkey vultures.

The sights, sounds, and smells of the Everglades blend as my awareness unfurls like a flower in bloom. But before the bud can fully unfold, one afternoon during a visit to the Miccosukee Big Cypress Reservation, I receive a text from Aurora: PERP CAUGHT. COME HOME.

He is Jan van Keet, age twenty-eight. There's no doubt about his guilt, reasonable or otherwise. He mirrors the description I gave the police, the *NIRVANA* tattoo on his forearm a brand of guilt, the crimson scar on his forehead a mark of Cain. His fingerprints and hair fibers were in my apartment, his semen on my bed sheets, his handwriting on the demeaning note, and more. He took pictures of me nude, bloodied, unconscious. Why? What has this sick, twisted version of humanity done with them?

The State of Florida charges him with sodomy, aggravated rape, sexual battery, kidnapping (dragging me against my will and by force from my bed onto the floor and then moving me by threat of force back onto the bed), assault, extortion, breaking and entering, home invasion, robbery (my father's gun has never been found), burglary, hate crimes, and conspiracy to commit all of these crimes (with Andrew) and a host of lesser-included offenses. He faces life in prison without the possibility of parole.

There is a misdemeanor charge filed by my office – assault-and-battery on a federal officer, me, which appears to be superfluous until I find out more. Van Keet is a South African citizen, an operative in a diamond-smuggling and money-laundering cartel being investigated by other attorneys in my office.

Van Keet says Andrew worked for him and didn't have diamonds he was supposed to deliver, says Andrew gave him the key to our condo, telling him the missing diamonds were in his bedroom, says that Andrew said, "My mom's hot. She likes it rough. Have fun with her."

Van Keet cuts a deal with the state attorney and the U.S. Attorney, Aurora's boss. He'll incriminate and testify against the cartel brass – presently laundering over thirty-million dollars a month in the U.S. – in exchange for dismissal of the state charges and a plea of guilty to the federal charge, one year in a minimum-security-federal penitentiary, and then extradition to South Africa, where he'll have immunity and a new identity in a witness-protection program.

When I hear this, I storm Aurora's office.

"After what that man did to me, he gets a year in a country club, no bars, no fences, a gym, tennis courts, horses?"

She's rifling files, looks up at me, says in her sweetest voice, "Will you help me?"

She hands me a photo of a snarling convict, shaved head, and forearms that make Van Keet's look like pencils. The caption under his photo says, Gregory de Vito, Aryan Brotherhood, six-one, two-fifteen, twenty years for mayhem and transporting minor boys across state lines.

A man in another photo she shows me also has a shaved pate, but his has diagonal scars that cross his head like dissection marks. His photo's caption says: Eugenio Alexandro Martinez, Cuban Mafia, six-three, two-twenty-five, eight years for narcotics trafficking with a six-year enhancement for raping an inmate.

"These cons would appreciate a year's transfer to minimum security," Aurora says. "Which one should be van Keet's cell-mate?"

I stagger, literally, under the weight of what she proposes, sit on the one chair in her office not covered with files and pleadings. Her suggestion violates more laws than van Keet was charged with. Of one thing I'm sure. Vigilante justice makes the world unsafe.

"You can't do this," I say.

She regards me with astonishment. "Gregory or Eugenio will protect van Keet, make sure he gets out of minimum security alive. I have their word. And Uncle Sam will provide van Keet with a set of false teeth when he's released."

No way will I accede to this subterfuge, sink so low. The muscles in my shoulders cramp. I cross my legs, fold my arms.

I thought I knew Aurora, held her in the highest regard. Never would I have imagined she'd descend into the muck.

She pours me a cup of tea.

I point to the photo of Martinez. "Six months with him, then six months with the other!"

The mountain range of ice that's crushed my chest melts, the pressure dissipating with the faint sound of a reptile's hiss like air from a pinpricked punctured inner tube. I take a tissue from a pink-and-white floral box on Aurora's desk, dab my eyes, and say, "What's up all the time with the tears?"

Wearing a plaid 1940s suit ensemble in earth tones – high-neck fitted jacket and matching dress – standing, I wait outside the courtroom where Andrew's preliminary hearing is being held. Derek stands beside me.

"You have lipstick on your teeth," he says.

I rub my tongue over my new permanent caps; the visits to the dentist I thought would never end finally have. I can eat apples but not without occasional twinges of pain. My jaw is still inflamed, the TMJ syndrome remains. I've only gained five pounds. Thank God for Misty, always ready to shop.

The physical reminders of the rape are less daunting than the other kind, the kind that's embarrassed me in meetings or in court when I've choked up, losing my composure for reasons I understand but cannot explain. The nightmares have yet to sub-side.

Misty, Aurora, my mother have urged me to see a counselor, but how would that go? Would the therapist read what I wrote on the intake form – People say my son sent this man to rape me, but he didn't – close the file and say to me, "What does your son say?"

Derek's partner, Edgar—blond, crew cut—smiles at me. He wears a navy-blue suit, powder-blue shirt, and white-and-blue-paisley silk tie, a step up from Derek's plaid-sport-coat-and-brown-loafers look. He leans against a wall, looking as if he'd look great wearing nothing.

"Is Edgar married?" I say.

Jealousy blanches Derek's cheeks, stills his watchful eyes.

We should play poker," I say.

"Divorced," Derek says.

Edgar looks at me, his smile radiating warmth. Has he done that before? I return the smile. Maybe in two years. If we're both still single.

Lawyers in suits – some shabby, some elegant – read files, talk in hushed or excited tones to blue-collar workers, to bankers, to the glamorous, to the down-on-their luck. Cops loiter, talking to one another, looking bored, waiting.

The solid-core cypress doors of Murray's courtroom swing open. The perp, wearing chains around his waist and ankles over an orange jumpsuit, his hands cuffed behind his back, is escorted out of the preliminary hearing by two mesomorphic deputy sheriffs. His face is puffy. His eyes are lifeless buttons of coal. It's the first time he's seen me since the rape, and he sneers. Tomorrow he'll be transferred to the federal penitentiary, not knowing what's waiting for him there. But to my shame and satisfaction, I know.

Edgar and one of the deputies acknowledge each other with nods. Edgar strolls over to them and the deputies abruptly jerk van Keet to a halt.

Poking van Keet's chest, Edgar says something that I can't hear but I do hear the lawmen's derisive laughter. Van Keet shrinks back, squirms.

"Come along, sweetheart," one of the deputies says as they drag their prisoner away.

The bailiff and Connie Knight come out of the courtroom. The bailiff calls my name.

I've only come to court at Derek's insistence. "You're going to have to live with this decision," he said. "Don't make it until you're there."

I'd thought I'd feel guilty when I saw van Keet. I don't. My complicity in the conditions of his incarceration constitutes conspiracy, misuse of the power of my office, aiding and abetting battery and sodomy. If I can do that, disobeying a subpoena is trifling.

My decision made, my lot thrown in with the lawless, I say, "I'm not going in."

Connie Knight says, "If you won't testify, you should tell that to the judge."

"How dare you speak to me?" I say.

Derek places his hand on my shoulder, and I turn on him.

"What? You think I'm going to hit her?" I say, raising my voice. "If I were going to knock that supercilious look off her face, I'd have already done it."

In an audible gasp, she sucks in air as if she had been hit and steps back. Edgar stands near us, crosses his muscular arms, chews gum, says nothing. Two cops approach, hands on the butts of their guns. Edgar holds out his badge; the cops walk away.

A courier leaves the courtroom. I see Andrew sitting at the defense table, wearing a camel-colored sport coat, pale-green shirt, and tan tie—an outfit that makes him look carefree, as if he were on holiday, guilty. He needs a criminal-defendant wardrobe consultant. I consider marching over to the defense table and telling Georges Bohem just that.

I walk into the courtroom; the others follow.

Andrew turns. He looks directly at me. He doesn't seem surprised, disappointed, or pleased. He doesn't smile or wave. His face is inscrutable. Is he afraid? Ashamed? Relieved? I'd thought I'd know these things.

"Ms. Verus, please approach the witness stand and be sworn." Murray says.

"Yes, Your Honor," I say.

Part II Andrew



Betty Mae

Professor Betty Mae Verus – bone-thin and lighter-than-the-wind – listening to Bob Dylan singing about God and Abraham, drove fast, too fast, through the dusk, north from Fakahatchee over gravel-and-dirt roads. Platinum and gold Muscogee jewelry encircled her neck, her wrists and fingers; snake-proof Gore-Tex-lined swamp boots, concealing a sheathed cold-steel hunting knife, were laced up to her calves.

Misty air, cool and dank, infused with the faint musk of freshwater plants in bloom and the telltale rot of those in decay, its pressure falling, foretold the juggernaut of Hurricane Andrew, ravaging the Bahamas on its relentless warpath toward Florida's southeast coast.

Estella, Betty Mae's sixteen-year-old pregnant daughter, looking out the rear window of the Pontiac station wagon— aquamarine, the color of her eyes—spat out two words: "That worm."

"Please," said Betty Mae.

"Whatever," Estella said, fastening her seatbelt.

Wind, Estella and Betty Mae's white shepherd-wolf mix, more wolf than dog, nestled in the storage bay in the back of the car between zippered nylon bags packed with tents, tarps, first-aid supplies, drums, rattles, tinctures perfected by Betty Mae's mother, Sarah Abiaka—a Seminole medicine woman and descendant of sangomas, Zulu shamans—swamp torches, mosquito nets, and everything else necessary to survive alone in the Everglades for a month or more. These provisions, secured to iron cleats bolted to the corrugated-steel bed of the Pontiac's rear compartment, lay beside a deflated inflatable boat and boxwood-beavertail paddles.

As they jostled over debris on the back roads and the depressions in them, Betty Mae knew of the hurricane but wasn't concerned. The radio was broken, she'd last heard a weather report hours earlier, but she was too intent upon escape, too apprehensive with worry to worry about what she couldn't know. What she did know was that they were on schedule to make it safely back to their home in Miami before hurricane winds made landfall.

Major Gabriel Verus, a marine aviator to whom she'd been married for sixteen years, had been killed in the Gulf War two years before. Karl Godfrey, Gabe's stepbrother, had been a close member of the family. So it

would have been understatement to say that Betty Mae was surprised when six months earlier she discovered that Estella was pregnant, that Karl was the father, and that he had absconded with her.

Armed with arrest warrants for kidnapping and statutory rape, the chiefs of the Metro-Dade and the Seminole Police Departments had frequently assured Betty Mae that officers tasked with handcuffing Karl and rescuing Estella were executing their duty with diligence. That didn't stop Betty Mae from searching on her own and, when she'd finally found them, Karl was drunk, and he'd brandished a gun.

Tomorrow would be the first day of the Fall Semester and the first meeting of her popular class, Introduction to Metaphysics, that had garnered her an award for outstanding teaching. She never delivered a lecture the first day of class. Rather she reserved that time for the type of philosophical contemplations one might find in Plato's dialogues, though the questions she asked were more Cartesian than Socratic. Even so her analyses would have displeased Descartes.

Pacing, she would ask, What is real? How can we know what is real? Is a dream reality? Does reality require physicality? Does love have physical reality? Can it be identified by heartbeat, respiration, brainwaves, chemical reactions? Can it be detected by an electrocardiogram? A CAT Scan? A brain scan or any other physical measurement? If not, can it be real?

What are we able to know? What we sense? Dogs have an exceptionally acute sense of smell. Does that mean that dogs can know truths that we cannot? And do people who can sense things others cannot know truths that others cannot?

To comprehend reality, must we ask what is its opposite? When Franz Kafka wrote in *The Trial*, "The right understanding of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other," was he being facetious? Insightful?

Physics describes reality as vastly different from what we experience. From the point of view of physics, this volume of the writings of Thomas Aquinas – and she would hold the book aloft as if it were the ten commandments – is mostly empty space, yet we don't experience it that way. Since we rely on science and technology every day, can we deny that physics is correct and what we perceive is not?

Is Stephen Hawking correct when he proclaims that philosophy is dead and that understanding and explaining reality is now solely within the

purview of science? If Dr. Hawking is correct, then – as he says – all cause and effect is predetermined; free will is an illusion. Without free will, can there be moral responsibility? And is the answer to this question solely within the purview of science?

Quantum mechanics explains that what we can know about sub-atomic particles is based on probabilities. If we want to know the location of a particle at a particular time, we can know only where it probably will be. Quantum mechanics also teaches that when we observe subatomic particles interacting, we change them. So how would a determinist explain this? Describe it as deterministic unpredictability?

And what of the mystery of consciousness? Can it be explained in terms of a chemical reciprocal action of particles? Or the transfer of energy between particles? Of molecules? Of any physical substance?

It was no use; she couldn't concentrate on her upcoming class discussion because she couldn't set aside her fear that Karl, who'd been asleep when she and Estella had fled from his trailer, was likely awake by now, angry, and chasing them in his Corvette.

Under more serene circumstances, at this time of night Betty Mae would likely have been deep in the Everglades, far from urban light pollution, positioning her powerful telescope so that she could analyze the starlight it collected, hoping to detect the effects of a severe warping of spacetime or evidence of dark matter expanding the universe at speeds greater than the speed of light, believing that these celestial phenomena, among others, would provide answers to questions that had been asked since the incipience of human cognition and succinctly written in paint on canvas by Paul Gauguin: *D'où Venons Nous/ Que Sommes Nous/ Où Allons Nous*—Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

It was Betty Mae's father, Marcus Kayalu, a professor of theoretical physics at Florida A&M, who'd instilled in Betty Mae the belief that knowing the universe is essential to understanding life on earth because, he'd said, far too much of what we believe about consciousness is based upon superstitions, cultural myths, and misconceptions about reality that stem from what we think we've perceived. For example – and this was one of his favorites – until the seventeenth century, it was heresy to question the Church's geocentric model of the solar system. For proposing that the earth circled the sun, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake. But when the Roman Catholic Church reversed its position and allowed studies of the

solar system based upon Copernicus's heliocentric model, the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution were spawned. Had the Church maintained its insistence that all celestial objects rotate around the earth, humanity would have been deprived of the discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton.

Her poppa's reasoning was all to the good. And Betty Mae was quick to repeat it to anyone who questioned the relevance of space exploration. But despite that, she was simply hooked on astronomy. Her sister, Charlotte Crow, had said that astronomy was Betty Mae's drug of choice.

Near Ochopee, the Pontiac careening onto Highway 41, the Tamiami Trail, and with no warning the hypnotic sensation of the car swaying and bumping along to the cadence of Dylan's song— its beat, its whistles, its chant-like lyrics—impelled Betty Mae involuntarily into hidden reality, a place where Dante Alighieri – poet, pilgrim, shaman – had traveled. Betty Mae didn't take issue with the barebones architecture of hidden reality as Dante described it in his *Divina Commedia*—the Underworld, the cosmic or magic mountain, and the Upperworld, the interstellar medium referred to at least since the dawn of history by the devotees of a multitude of religions as the heavens. Like Dante, while travelling in hidden reality, Betty Mae had experienced the significance of death, though they would have disagreed about what that was.

Unlike Dante, in hidden reality, Betty Mae had not encountered the living dead.

Though it seemed she'd been detained for hours in hidden reality, quick as light, as the Pontiac veered onto the Tamiami Trail, a ribbon of asphalt crossing the state over its wetlands, her awareness returned to panicked wildlife – deer, minks, foxes, panthers, and boars – stampeding and birds – snail kites, storks, eagles, and buzzards – flying toward and past them from east to west over the marshes.

The road, slick in the liquescent air, running before them like life accelerating across its span, vanished beyond a veil of gray mist descending from the firmament, a bulwark against the onslaught of on-rushing time, a horizon beyond which lay either hope or its abandonment. But in Betty Mae's mind's eye, the horizon toward which the Pontiac sped was merely a mirage that would, as mirages reliably do, lift as the car thundered through it.

Lightning streaked through the last light of day, plump raindrops fell, the wipers squeaked.

Estella moaned. “Oh. My. God.”

Betty Mae, reaching for her daughter’s hand, felt amniotic fluid soaking the car seat. Then, suddenly, the veil lifted, and the headlights illuminated — what? Dante’s Leopard of Malice? his Lion of Violence? the She-Wolf of Incontinence? No. It was merely an alligator lumbering across the road — ten feet long, five hundred pounds — the car hurtling toward it at ninety feet per second.

Betty Mae jerked the steering wheel; the Pontiac swerved. The gator must have heard the brakes screech, the tires skid, seen its imminent death. With astonishing agility, the reptile, naturally sluggish on land, swiveled on its hind legs, reversing direction, skirling as the car slammed into it, a flash of its scaly-olive hide on a blue-green fender, bright red splattering in every direction, the carcass tumbling head over tail onto the hood, cracking the windshield with an earsplitting bam, rending gristle and gore into the stench of freshly splayed intestines.

The Pontiac fishtailed. Betty Mae swung the steering wheel into the spin, pumped the brakes, and would have controlled the car, but a rear tire blew, spiraling them over the shoulder of the highway, snapping the bindings fastening the zippered nylon bags, flinging them forward, crushing Wind, who vocalized a yelp of death, against the metal-plated back of the rear seat.

With a twang of twisting steel, the airbags deployed in a ferocious blast, deflating an instant later to quiescence save for the grunts of frogs, the buzzing of dragonflies, and the whirring of cicadas in an otherwise eerie stillness, lightning but no thunder, Estella pantomiming screams, the lyrics, shrieks, and thumps of Dylan’s *Highway 61 Revisited* turning against her will over and over again in her mind, a nightmare of fury and anguish she couldn’t shake as she gasped for breath, as if staving off drowning in the moisture-laden, pressure-falling air.

They hadn’t seen another car since leaving Karl’s fungal-infested singlewide rusting under its canopy of strangler vines. The drizzle became a shower. God wanted a killing done down on Highway 61. And the nearest clinic was in Naples, forty miles west on Highway 41.

Within that scant moment in Ochopee, milliseconds in ordinary reality, when the Pontiac quickly turned, as if tossed, to the east onto Highway 41, Betty Mae was surprised to be in hidden reality in a distant outreach of the Milky Way.

In the *Paradiso*, searching for the beauty of eternity, the pilgrim Dante ascended to the Circle of Jupiter, the afterlife dwelling of the rulers who had been just during their lives on earth. But Dante could ascend no farther, could not continue his transit to Saturn, until those souls presented him with a dazzling semiotic display of his power animal, Eagle. In hidden reality, Betty Mae traveled with her power animal, White Bear, as she searched for remedies for the mental, physical, and spiritual afflictions that beset women and men suffering a single illness: a diminution, if not the deprivation, of free will.

For the sangoma, like most other shamans, hidden reality was a domain attained not by using hallucinogens or by sheer religious fervor but by using the sonic pulses of drumbeats, whistles, chants, and rattles. And so, in retrospect, it wasn't surprising that for Betty Mae the sonic pulses of Dylan's song momentarily parted the curtains shielding the hidden reality of stars on the outskirts of the Milky Way from the ordinary reality of Ochopee, Florida, the place the Pontiac was speeding away from as it hastened toward the embrace of the onrushing hurricane.

Shamans entered hidden reality with specific intentionality, prepared, fully alert, accompanied by their power animal. That's how it was done. That's how it had been done for millennia. Yet in that instant too brief to permit premeditation, as the Pontiac blindly raced on to Highway 41, without her power animal, White Bear, without a sense of purpose, and without regard for Estella, Fate – taking the reins from Betty Mae, mocking her denial of determinism, vanquishing her free will – transported her into a region of the Upperworld so remote that it was understood only theoretically by humans.

Immanuel Kant had described galaxies as island universes, an image that did justice to Betty Mae's intergalactic observations in hidden reality. As a python would devour one of its young, one hundred sixty thousand light years from earth, the Milky Way was cannibalizing a dwarf galaxy, the Large Magellanic Cloud. And amid the trillion stars rotating around the black hole at the center of that cluster of celestial energy and mass, a strange duo, two stars in a binary system, an odd couple if you will, in a

decaying orbit of inevitable destruction, circled each other as dance partners would in a do-si-do.

From hidden reality, Betty Mae could see that the smaller star, the hotter of the two, was a spinning neutron star, making five hundred revolutions per second, pulsing beams of radio waves from its poles. It had a diameter of twenty kilometers, approximately the width of the San Francisco Peninsula, but a density of two-and-a-half solar masses: two-and-a-half times greater than the mass of the sun. Its surface was a crust of iron and its inner core was a liquid sea of neutrons four-hundred trillion times denser than water. A particle of this star the size of a small grain of sand would on earth weigh more than a locomotive.

Spinning and turning in its dance of death with the neutron star, a cooling supergiant red star, having more than ten times the mass of the sun, pulsed in the throes of its own imminent solar mortality. Stellar winds raging in the photosphere of the colossal star ejected plumes of hydrogen, helium, and heavier elements like gold and platinum into circumstellar rings of metallic oranges, brilliant reds, and vibrant violets, some of which, in a swirling colorful flow, like a rainbow of solar gasses, accreted to the neutron star, dangerously increasing its mass. In its interior, the supergiant star was exhausting the elements that fueled the nuclear fusion necessary to create the outward thermal pressure that counteracted the crushing forces of gravity.

When the elements fueling its nuclear fusion were exhausted, in a reality ordinarily unrevealed, through its plasma – its burning layers of gases – Betty Mae observed the massive star's dense-superheated nickel-iron core – an island of stability more than five thousand kilometers in diameter – together with its outer layers instantly implode in the absence of any force to counteract gravity.

Within the span of a breath, when the diameter of the collapsing core had condensed to thirty kilometers, the implosion was abruptly halted by the near-unstoppable nuclear force, pressure exerted by neutrons squeezed so closely together that they counteracted the star's gravity.

When the implosion suddenly ceased, the mass and energy that had been in the outer layers of the super-giant red star that had been collapsing toward the core rebounded, providing enormous heat that sent powerful shockwaves back through the star, out from its core, radiating neutrinos that would bathe the earth, and producing flashes of light more brilliant than the

light of all the other stars in its galaxy and energy so vast that the star's plasma was blown into the interstellar medium in the prismatic conflagration of a supernova, a celestial cloud of sparkling hot-white synapses suffusing to electric greens and gold and stardust composed of the heavy elements that make possible the chemistry of life on earth, a display of light more spectacular in appearance yet more subtle in meaning than the message spelled out in the lights illuminated by the souls that had in the *Paradiso* welcomed Dante to the Circle of Jupiter.

The denuded-collapsed core of the colossal red star had also evolved, like the sister star it orbited, into a neutron star, pebble size in comparison to the supergiant star that had spawned it but with a mass a half-million times that of earth's. The binary-star system Betty Mae observed now had two neutron stars circling each other in an accelerating, decaying orbit.

An aquamarine stone the size and shape of an egg, composed in part of exceedingly heavy elements that didn't exist on earth, glowing from within in darker and lighter shades of blue-greens rotating in zonal bands in opposite directions like cyclones and anticyclones, whizzed by. Betty Mae had never taken an object from hidden reality back to ordinary reality. But this object, this philosopher's egg, was something she would have to study, and so before it could escape her reach, she plucked it from its trajectory.

Gas and stardust that had been elements of the supergiant star's mantle, failed to escape the gravitational pull of the orbiting neutron stars and hastened their collision. The neutron stars, collectively, were now too heavy to be supported by the nuclear force. Gravity plunged the stars into another violent implosion that warped, wrenched, and twisted spacetime so that it folded back upon itself, forming a whirling, tumbling black hole that was masked by a cloak of invisibility to those in ordinary reality, but not to Betty Mae, witnessing the cataclysm with absolute delight in hidden reality.

Everything, every remnant of the neutron stars and all other energy and mass that lay within the mangled region of spacetime that was encompassed by the black hole was obliterated as it funneled into a singularity of infinite density at a terminus of space, in an absence of time, in a portal between the universe of human perception and other universes, in a hologram of infinite destinies.

Infinite destinies at the singularity were problematic for Betty Mae as they imperiled her conviction of absolute mortality, which heretofore could only have been negated by an observation of life after death.

Near sunrise, near the Tree Snail Hammock in the Big Cypress National Preserve, at first light on the day that the Pontiac would later spiral off Highway 41, barred owls, nighthawks, and bats faded back into the big cypress groves as red-shouldered hawks and northern harriers took their place hunting for fish, smaller birds, and small rodents. Among the seas of sawgrass, strangler figs, and Lysiloma trees – with fern-like leaves and pods, like legumes, of seeds – crows hunted brightly arboreal-colored ligus tree snails spiraled with green, brown, yellow and pink stripes, while Betty Mae searched for and then found a smooth two-fisted, five-sided stone.

On the surfaces of the stone she saw the Everglades, for centuries the home of her mother's family, a theater of evolution endlessly spawning creatures like no others and plants with yet-to-be-discovered healing powers, but among these myriad scenes there was no sign of Estella.

In the afternoon, back in her home on Osceola Island in the Intracoastal Waterway flowing between Miami and Miami Beach, Betty Mae spoke to her sister, Charlotte Crow, who had called to say that Karl and Estella were hiding out in a trailer parked on the beach of an estuary near Fakahatchee on Florida's Gulf coast. The police were focused solely on the threat to public safety posed by the category 5 hurricane that would soon thunder ashore. Motivated rather than deterred by reports of 175-mile-per-hour winds, Betty Mae and her wolf-dog hastily left, driving to a backwater, even by Everglades standards, between Wilderness Waterway and Florida Bay.

In the embers of twilight, the Pontiac rolled by a cluster of palmettos, through a field of sword ferns and dandelions, toward white sands. A sun-bleached yellow canoe straddled the beach and the scrubland near Karl's red Corvette. In a grove of banyan trees, a dilapidated rusting hulk of a mobile home blighted the grandeur.

The trailer was dark and silent. If anyone were home, they would have heard the Pontiac driving toward them. Steer horns were mounted over the front door. Wind and Betty Mae climbed five splintered pine steps and knocked. No one answered. The door was locked but it was easy to turn the plug without a key, allowing Betty Mae and Wind to slip inside.

A rancid odor permeated a living room furnished with a worn sofa and a painting of a cattle roundup hanging above it. There was an empty Scotch whiskey bottle on a sideboard, a TV with rabbit ears, and a dining table. An enormous cockroach patrolled the kitchen.

A rat scurried zigzag toward a hole in the kitchen floor. Wind leapt, the rodent turned, snapping its razor teeth, but was no match for the wolf-dog. She snatched its neck, shook once, then dropped the dead rat and snarled at a man half obscured by shadow, his back slouched against a hallway wall, his arms crossed, wearing a cowboy hat and buckaroo boots, looking like the Marlboro Man save for the gun he held.

“Good girl, Wind,” he said. “Howdy, Dr. Betty Mae.”

Wind barred her teeth, flashing the six two-inch curved incisors in her upper jaw. Her snarl became a growl. Her almond-shaped slanted yellow eyes were fixed on the man as if he were prey.

“Wind? What’s wrong girl?” he said. “Come. Come here.”

The canine – seventy pounds, her muscles tense, hard – stepped back, crouched, growled louder.

“Wind,” Betty Mae said in a stern voice, “down.”

Slowly, the wolf-dog, not taking her eyes off the man, lowered her haunches and let her front paws slide out in front of her. Her body quavered as if, upon the slightest provocation, she would spring into an attack with a burst of speed exceeding 30 miles per hour and jaws capable of crushing and snapping apart a man’s femur with a single bite.

Betty Mae said, “Uncle Karl.”

Waving his gun in Wind’s direction, Karl said, “What’s wrong with her?”

“You leaving?” said Betty Mae.

“What is that?” he said. “Wishful thinking? Freudian insight?”

“If I had insight,” said Betty Mae, “I wouldn’t be in this dump.”

He looked askance. “There’s deferred maintenance,” he admitted. “But I’m not ashamed.” He came into the living room, smelling of liquor, wearing a sleeveless undershirt. Like his stepbrother, Gabe, he had a biceps tattoo. Gabe’s tattoo was the insignia of the Marine Corps. Karl’s was a cowboy atop a bucking bronco. Gabe’s face had never feigned insincerity. Karl’s face, a cloud of menace, became beatific.

“Where’s yours?” he said softly.

“My hat?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Betty Mae,” he said. “Where’s your gun?”

“I don’t have a gun,” she said, raising her whip-thin arms akimbo.

Looking at Wind, he said, “Have you brainwashed her into thinking she’s all wolf?”

Then Estella, wearing a maternity dress the color of Wind's eyes, near full term, came into the living room holding a document bearing the Florida state seal, and Betty Mae saw that her daughter would have a son.

"Wind," Estella said with delight, opening her arms in an invitation of a hug. Wind leapt toward her, jumped up on her hind legs, and her front paws came to rest on Estella's shoulders, giving them the appearance of dance partners. Estella rubbed Wind's muzzle with her free hand. The wolf-dog hopped back and circled Estella, licking her legs and sniffing her distended belly.

Offering the document to Betty Mae, Estella said, "We're married!" She knelt, rubbed the side of her face on Wind's shoulder. Not looking at her mother, Estella said, "This is our home. We're in love. I'm not leaving." Then she stood, glared at Karl and said, "What are you? Nuts? Put away the goddamn gun."

Indigo light, like the erupting vibrant violets in the plumes of stardust ejected from the exploding supergiant red star, leapt from the womb, and Wind howled.

With strength that would grow, the fetus projected an atmospheric disturbance, a vortex that tightened around Betty Mae's neck, disrupting her balance, almost dragging her to the floor and prompting a near heart-stopping realization. Like Colonel George Armstrong Custer, like General Phillip "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" Sheridan, like President Andrew Jackson, the proponent and enforcer of the Indian Removal Act, her grandson was imbued with evil.

Betty Mae said, "Hush, Wind!" To Estella and Karl she said, "Why wasn't I invited to the wedding?"

Karl and Estella said nothing.

"You going to offer me a drink? Something to eat?" said Betty Mae.

"An omelet?" Estella said.

"Got whiskey in the car," said Betty Mae.

"I'm famished," Karl said, glancing at the empty whiskey atop the TV. He put an arm around Estella and the *in-utero* malevolence receded, like the imploding neutron stars, into an abyss.

Betty Mae said, "We should celebrate." And then to Karl she said, "Why not put away the gun?" and added in a loving tone, "Son?"

In the bedroom, Karl put on a pearl-button cowboy shirt. Bareheaded, he returned to the living room without the gun.

By the Pontiac, Betty Mae turned her back toward the trailer so that neither Karl nor Estella could see her pour not one, but two vials of brown powder – her own potentially lethal mixture of kava pyrones, mandrake, and *salvia divinorum* – into a bottle of Johnny Walker Red. Back in the trailer, Estella was setting the table and Karl was on the phone, pacing.

“Wrong number, ma’am,” he said.

Betty Mae fed Wind, then gave Karl three fingers of whiskey. He nodded in thanks.

To the woman who had telephoned, Karl said, “Ms. Diamond, I don’t know your daughter. Lucy? You say her name is Lucy?” He looked at Estella, raised his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders as if in query.

Estella pursed her lips, shook her head.

“Ms. Diamond, your daughter isn’t here. My wife is here and my sister-in-law, I mean my mother-in-law. You want to talk to them?”

On the TV, Betty Mae got static.

“Say,” said Karl, “how did you get our phone number? It’s unlisted.”

Estella poured a cup of coffee for Betty Mae. Then she said to Karl, “Let me talk to the lady.”

“What evacuation?” Karl said, his jaw working nervously. He tugged his earlobe, sipped the whiskey. Then he abruptly dropped the phone’s receiver, lay on the sofa, and fell asleep.

When Estella picked up the receiver, she heard a dial tone. She replaced the handset into its cradle and felt Karl’s forehead. “He’s not himself when he drinks,” she said.

Betty Mae talked about the baby’s best interests.

Estella interrupted. “Save the lecture on Hegel for your students.”

“History,” Betty Mae said. “We have to learn from the past.”

“Psychobabble,” Estella said.

Betty Mae talked about Karl’s sexual involvement with an-other girl.

“She’s lying,” Estella said, shaking Karl. “I’m not listening until we hear his side.”

Showing Estella a photo of a girl no more than fifteen, Betty Mae said, “Her name is Claudia. Call her.”

Estella sat beside Karl, her body still, her face a duality of concentration and a maze of emotions. She dialed the phone.

Betty Mae studied her daughter – crinkled nose, smooth forehead, cheerful frown, each feature giving way during the telephone conversation

to a face sagged with an appearance of age.

After she said good-bye to Claudia, Estella retrieved the gun. She kicked Karl, but he barely stirred. Savagely, she kicked him again. “Wake up,” she yelled.

He turned over, snoring louder.

She pulled him up – his shirt wet where he’d drooled, his chin fallen to his chest – and with a tremendous blow, hit him across the face with an open hand, snapping his head back; his eyes opened. She cocked the gun, pointed it at his forehead and pulled the trigger just a moment after he slid back down, back onto the sofa, back into sleep. A thunderous roar rocked the trailer as the bullet blew a hole through the painting of the roundup and the wall behind it.

Estella’s shoulders heaved. Wind howled with the pain inflicted by the fortissimo of the gun’s eruption. Karl snored.

Betty Mae, shaking her head, trying to clear it of the tinnitus caused by the blast, took the gun from Estella, calmed Wind, considered slashing the tires of the Corvette but instead called her mother while Estella packed.

“An evil father, an evil son,” Sarah said. “There will be an accident, a fire. He will hurt Estella. He will kill other Indians.”

Her momma was right. It was always so with these children.

Sarah said, “Ending evil is good.”

As Wind, Estella, and Betty Mae hurried out, Karl stirred.

Gabriel Verus, a white man twice his wife’s size, had insisted that their daughter’s eyes were jade, like his, though Estella’s eyes were more blue than green. He’d wanted a boy, but Estella hadn’t disappointed him as she loved camping, hunting, and canoeing.

When Gabe, a naval aviator, lived at home – near the Pensacola Naval Air Station – between missions, Estella was his shadow, always with him, always on the go. Betty Mae had warned Gabe that Estella’s interests would change, that as she grew older she’d bond more with her own friends, form her own interests, be less of a buddy. But he’d disagreed, observing that Betty Mae loved the outdoors even more than he did. So why would their daughter be different?

Gabe hadn’t lived long enough for Betty Mae to find out which one of them would have been right. One night he left for his final mission, he’d said to Estella, using a closed-fist back-and-forth gesture between their

chests to show the connection of their hearts, “We’ll always be together, you and me.” Three weeks later he was killed in military action, too soon to see his best pal flourish into full adolescence.

Before losing her father, Estella had been motivated, inquisitive, interested in everything. After his death, she was hostile and uninterested. Anything her mother said was rejected or contradicted because her mother was a relic, a fool, or worse.

One day, not long after Gabe’s funeral, Karl came by for lunch and Estella, giggling and reeking of marijuana, followed by Wind, came into the kitchen. Wind wagged her tail and bounded up to Karl, rubbing first one side of her body and then the other against his leg, as a cat would. Estella threw her arms around her uncle’s shoulders and kissed his cheek. Then she snatched a half-eaten tuna sandwich from his plate and began chewing.

“You’re grounded,” said Betty Mae.

“For how long?” said Estella, her mouth full, rolling her eyes.

“Until I can trust you again.”

“I hate you!” Estella yelled. She crossed her arms, staring at her mother. Betty Mae didn’t react, and Estella ran out of the house with Wind at her heels.

“She needs structure,” Karl said. “After school, she can work for me at the stables.”

Soon afterward, after school a few days a week, Estella and Wind began working with the horses at the ranch Karl managed. And he began spending weekends and evenings with his sister-in-law and his niece. He talked to Estella about her homework, her friends, Green Day, Spongehead, Nirvana, other grunge music, the grunge look, the punk look, and his stepbrother, often saying, “What would your father have said about that?” He told Betty Mae that Estella would soon get over her misplaced anger. And soon it appeared she had.

To everyone, apparently, other than Charlotte Crow, who kept her suspicions to herself.

If it were possible to converse with the dead, as Dante had, Betty Mae would have found a way as no one’s desire to communicate with the departed surpassed hers and no one had had better teachers. Her maternal grandpoppa, Bolëk Abiaka, a shaman and Seminole medicine man, often told her about his work with the spirits of their ancestors. He’d been her

first guide in hidden reality. He died when she was eleven and afterward, she searched everywhere for his soul, for his spirit living after death, to no avail.

A year after Gabe's death, Betty Mae published her well-received book, *Reason and Morals*, which presented a philosophy of contemporary morality predicated on her thesis that no form of conscious life exists after death. *The Divine Comedy* explored the afterlife consequences of the good and evil acts of the living and the reward of redemption or the punishment of eternal suffering after life.

Reason and Morals explored the nature and consequences of good and evil acts during a person's life to demonstrate that an ethic of absolute mortality, a conviction that there is no conscious life after death, was necessary to optimize free will and hence happiness. What was blasphemous to Dante, a denial of the immortality of the soul, was a necessary virtue according to Betty Mae. What was optional according to Kant, reliance on reason to reach a personal conclusion about the question of life after death, was a nonstarter for Betty Mae.

And so, as they fled Karl's trailer, with the fate of Estella's son in his grandmamma's hands, his imminent death was foretold because Betty Mae, with no qualm about the moral necessity of her choice, had freely willed it to be so.

In Betty Mae's childhood home, the picture window in her poppa's study framed a daytime vista of long-needle pines, sweet gum, and elderberry. Considering his profession, the decor of Marcus's office offered no surprise: telescopes, binoculars, astronomical charts, physics texts, a Princeton diploma conferring a PhD, and a chalkboard, a state-of-the-art pedagogical tool in the age of slide rules.

When Betty Mae earned tenure, in addition to the books one would expect to find by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Russell, the shelves in her office at the University of Miami also housed texts, treatises, periodicals and journals devoted to nature, quantum mechanics, and astrophysics. An anomaly for a professor of philosophy? To the contrary. If Betty Mae's epistemological inquiries—knowledge, belief, and the interstices between them—were an atom, quantum mechanics would have been the nucleus. If inquiries into the nature of free will were the solar system, then general relativity would have been the sun.

By the time of Bolëk's death, Betty Mae understood her parents' heritages and was to become a percipient witness to the dysfunction of their marriage. Well before Seminole gaming lifted her people from poverty, Sarah Abiaka was raised in a village of chickees—huts supported by four posts that had raised, unfinished wood-plank floors, thatched roofs of palm fronds, and no walls to protect infants, children, and adults from insects, vermin, predators, or extremes in the weather. The village was built on sandy soil in a wasteland of wilderness along the banks of the Loxahatchee River in western Palm Beach County in south Florida.

Sarah was also a descendent of sangomas, Zulu shamans who'd migrated to western Africa and then were brought to the Western Hemisphere as slaves. She was her poppa's acolyte and a shaman with prowess surpassing his. She had the beauty of Andromeda and was intellectually gifted. She read relentlessly and as a result had a remarkable and commendable self-education as Abraham Lincoln had, as Michael Faraday had, and as had Akila, her progenitor, who like Lincoln and Faraday had lived in the nineteenth century.

Marcus Kayalu, Catholic, black, raised among mostly white peers, was the younger son of university professors of mathematics. He completed a post doc with Chandrasekhar in Chicago. He had the mannerisms of Mr. Magoo and the extroversion of a recluse. As a couple, Sarah and Marcus were as heterogeneous as the cultures they came from.

Soon after Marcus moved to Florida, he met Sarah, who, with her father, was piloting airboat excursions through the Everglades. When they returned to the docks, Marcus asked her out on a date. She was about to say no when Bolëk startled his daughter and his future son-in-law by saying, "Welcome star traveler." He put an arm around his daughter and said to her, "Your guide to ordinary reality has arrived in need of a guide of his own."

Betty Mae had no memory of her parents quarrelling before Bolëk's death and virtually none of a rapprochement in the half-dozen years that followed.

When she was seventeen, a senior in high school, Charlotte Crow, then nineteen and a sophomore majoring in psychology at the university where her father taught, became pregnant. When her white pastor, the baby's father, recanted his promise of marriage, Sarah pressured Charlotte Crow to have an abortion, causing animosity between her parents to intensify to a point of near irreconcilability.

Betty Mae, believing that only starlight could brighten her poppa's melancholy, persuaded him to teach astronomy to her and Charlotte Crow. Sarah attended a lesson.

"Last time," Marcus said, "we talked about Hawking radiation, how earlier this year, Dr. Stephen Hawking, a math professor at Cambridge University used," and he pointed to the chalkboard, "these equations to show that black holes emit radiation. Now if it can be proven that Dr. Hawking is correct—"

"Poppa?" said Charlotte Crow.

"He'll win the Nobel Prize," Marcus said.

"Dr. Bell—" Charlotte Crow said,

"Who?" said Marcus.

"My modern lit teacher—" said Charlotte Crow.

"Oh, Jocelyn Bell. I've met her," Marcus said. "Lovely lady. I understand it was a coup for the English department to get her."

"She says that neutron stars, black holes, they're just facts. If you want truth, you read literary fiction."

"Is that a genre," said Marcus. "like science fiction? What is literary fiction about?"

"It's realistic, so you have quirky characters and dysfunctional relationships. That's what's real and what reveals the truth about humanity," said Charlotte Crow. "Dr. Bell must know. She has tenure."

"Poppa had tenure before Dr. Bell was even born," said Betty Mae.

"You don't know anything about her," said Charlotte Crow.

Marcus said, "Ask Jocelyn, how can we understand who we are without understanding where we came from? Without understanding our place in the universe?"

"Poppa's right," said Sarah.

Marcus gave his wife an appreciative smile, lifting Betty Mae's spirits.

Sarah said, "To be close to The Creator, you must experience the cosmos. And if you don't do that, you won't know how to choose between good and evil."

"You have to understand neutron stars to be moral?" said Charlotte Crow.

"I'd like to think so," said Marcus. When, to his chagrin, no one laughed or responded at all, he said, "It comes down to this, Charlotte Crow: how important is it for you to live an examined life? When you turn off your

mind when math or science is discussed because you've decided that it's boring or too hard to learn or understand, or irrelevant, or if you're satisfied only reading about quirky characters and dysfunctional relationships, you're going to have a narrow view of life, you'll limit your own possibilities, your own potential.

"Only cultures that have encouraged exploration, made it possible, have been great. If the United States were to decide to leave space exploration to private enterprise, within a generation, we'd be eclipsed by other cultures, their standards of living would rise at our expense. The same is true of individuals. Read Faulkner, experience his quirky characters. I encourage it. But if you don't learn how science affects your life, you'll limit your potential. You won't live life to its fullest."

After a few moments, Marcus said, "H.G. Wells said that history is a race between education and catastrophe. Ask Dr. Bell if she thinks that education applies only to literary fiction."

"Okay," said Charlotte Crow. "I'll ask her."

"Praise Jesus," said Marcus. "Shall we talk about astronomy?" Hearing no objection, he pointed to other equations on the chalkboard.

"What do these prove?"

"That implosion is compulsory," said Betty Mae.

"Which means what?" said Marcus.

"If a neutron star becomes too heavy, gravity will overwhelm the nuclear force that had stabilized the star and the star will implode, collapse into a black hole."

"You look at those numbers and weird Greek letters and see neutron stars?" said Charlotte Crow. "How do you do that?"

"I don't actually see them," said Betty Mae. "But I want to. I want to see a neutron star implode into a black hole."

Marcus chuckled. "That's unlikely," he said. "It's been less than a decade since we first observed a neutron star."

"Who cares?" said Charlotte Crow. "Is the lesson over?"

"This science," said Marcus, "validates Einstein's theory of relativity. One last problem and we'll call it a day." He turned to Charlotte Crow, pointed to other equations. "What do these suggest?" he said.

She hesitated, stuttered.

"Remember," said Marcus, "our discussion of the controversy among theoretical physicists as to whether a singularity can exist outside of a black

hole.”

“I know,” said Betty Mae, “the equations imply that implosion can never form a naked singularity.”

“Unless,” Sarah interrupted, “The Creator wills otherwise.”

Marcus said, “If He—”

“She,” said Sarah.

“. . . created a naked singularity, then these equations couldn’t be solved.”

“If The Creator willed a naked singularity,” Sarah said, “She’d change the equations.”

“That’s circularity, not science,” said Marcus.

“Science is a relatively insignificant subset of reality,” said Sarah.

“Quite!” Marcus said. “We’ve come a long way from science bringing us close to God.” Erasing equations on the chalkboard, speaking with his back to his wife, he said, “Have you another contribution?”

“Bolëk’s spirit says that Charlotte Crow’s baby must be born in the River of Grass.”

Marcus turned, his pudgy jowls oscillating like a pulsar. “God Lord! That’s? That’s insane!”

“I warned you,” Sarah said, stepping so close to him that her breath fogged his glasses. “A white pastor, a negro church.”

“We have white congregants,” Charlotte Crow said.

“Will you do as your grandfather says?” said Sarah.

A month later, their car parked on an embankment of Highway 41 forty miles east of the Gulf Coast, Sarah and Betty Mae paddled a canoe, taking Charlotte Crow to ancestral pools enclosed within hardwood hammocks sheltering a sacred tree, an ancient gnarled buttonwood, its hollow filled with water so clear that one could easily envision, if she couldn’t actually see, a passage to the Underworld in the far reaches of its depths. Sarah and Betty Mae helped Charlotte Crow out of her clothes and rubbed her abdomen with catnip balm as she squatted in the water. Sarah blew whistles and shook ceremonial rattles. Betty Mae chanted and beat the childbirth drum.

It was raining when the baby’s head emerged. Sarah slipped two fingers behind his shoulders, turned him, and with the next contraction eased him out.

“A boy,” said Betty Mae.

“Enoch,” said Charlotte Crow, exhaling. “His name is Enoch.”

Enoch was the son of Cain. *Genesis* says Enoch lived 365 years.

Sarah clamped the umbilical cord, cut it, and moved away from her daughters. “The afterbirth is coming,” Sarah said to Betty Mae. “Don’t let Charlotte Crow touch the cord.”

But Betty Mae followed her momma. Enoch – his arms and legs moving out and back as if swimming – was still submerged. Reaching for the infant, Betty Mae was blinded by a burning aura of indigo. A powerful swirl of water sucked her beneath the surface; a chokehold throttled her windpipe. Her arms flailed; she swallowed swamp water trying to scream.

With one hand holding Enoch underwater, Sarah Betty Mae to the surface with the other.

The stranglehold on Betty Mae loosened and then was extinguished as Enoch’s little body stopped moving. A bruise the color of Enoch’s evil aura darkened around Betty Mae’s neck. She breathed deeply in the rain.

Sarah’s hands were bleeding. “A cursed birth,” she said.

When Charlotte Crow, debilitated, but moving by apparent force of will, stumbling over roots, reached them, she said, “What happened, Momma? Where’s Enoch? Where’s my baby?”

Sarah, turning to face Charlotte Crow, holding the corpse, said, “He was stillborn.”

Charlotte Crow collapsed; Betty Mae held her and Sarah and her daughters cried.

Sarah said, “Everything that is, is alive.”

Back home, still in shock from Enoch’s death and her own near-death, Betty Mae wore scarfs to hide the bruises on her neck. She was silent and afraid. But Charlotte Crow told her poppa that following an ancient Seminole custom, Sarah had murdered Enoch because his father was white.

“Did you see him alive?” Marcus said.

“No,” Charlotte Crow had to admit. “But I know he was born alive.”

Sarah asked for an inquest. The medical examiner, finding no fluid in the infant’s lungs, finding no bruises on the child or internal damage, ruled that the birth was stillborn, as Sarah had said. A flood of relief cleansed the poisoned fabric of their family life, transforming it into a quilt stitched with love and grace.

Convinced that a person who hadn't experienced Enoch's homicidal malice could never comprehend the necessity of his murder, that it had been committed in self-defense, Betty Mae never spoke to anyone about Enoch's birth or death.

In the Pontiac, in the silent aftermath of the collision with the alligator, Betty Mae knew that she had to rouse herself, get out of the car, help Estella to safety. Instead, unwillingly she struggled with the implications of infinite destinies, thoughts that should but wouldn't wait because infinite destinies were a magnetic force disrupting the trustworthiness of her moral compass.

In *Reason and Morals*, Betty Mae had asked if a belief in immortality could coexist with life's quintessential ethical decisions, conscious choices about right and wrong, good and evil, and had concluded, indubitably, that the consequence of belief in conscious life after death is the infliction of evil on the living.

Her investigation of this unfortunate phenomenon considered how Freud's theory of wish fulfillment spotlighted fallacies in life-after-death beliefs by showing how such beliefs, fostered by the same yearnings that gave rise to every myth and religion, had spawned a plethora of gods, causing the incalculable devastation of wars ostensibly waged to prove whose side god was on and how the motivations of kamikaze pilots and suicide bombers were delusions self-evident to all but the participating fanatics.

Critically examining the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions, the European-American genocide of Native Americans, other pogroms, holocausts, and edicts to kill blasphemers and unbelievers, *Reason and Morals* showed that accepting the promise of life after death as a reward for behaving ethically during life had invariably, inevitably, and ironically led to the exploitation of the believers, their subjugation to the will of a few elites, who'd protected their monopoly on power by perpetuating inequality in the distribution of wealth, thereby diminishing the quality of life for all but themselves.

When fantasy was, as a physicist might say, removed from the equation, experience revealed that the myth of consciousness transcending death was a defense mechanism preventing a full examination of life.

Reason revealed, contrary to Kant's reasoning, that stripped of the sentimentality of faith, consciousness could expire before the body did but not the other way around.

Belief in immortality soothed grief, gave respite from fear of death but if it did anything else of a positive nature, there was no objective, verifiable proof of it. The choice of whether to believe in life after death was among the most profound decisions a person could make. Thus Betty Mae regretted having proven that to reach a just and ethical result, a decision relating to right and wrong or good and evil had to be made with a firm conviction that mortality was absolute. Socrates' argument that one had to behave justly to protect the soul was based upon fallacy; the promise of life after death had become Orwellian newspeak. And so when Betty Mae had made the decision to quickly terminate the life of her grandson, it was without regard to the consequences to her own soul.

But since fleeing Karl's trailer, Betty Mae had witnessed a hologram of infinite destinies at the singularity of a black hole. Infinite destinies made everything and anything possible. One person's consciousness could subsume another's. A person could become an inanimate object and vice versa. And death could be defied. Infinite destinies made experience and reason irrelevant, undermined the foundations of rationality, and defeated certainty about absolute mortality because absolute mortality required that the destinies of the dead were far from infinite—they were complete, though, paradoxically, those who believed in absolute mortality and those who believed in life after death agreed by epistemological necessity on one thing: death extinguishes free will.

If Dante were right, and Betty Mae did murder her grandson, then upon her death, Minos would consign her immortal soul to the ninth circle, the bottom of the well of hell, where she'd suffer for eternity, frozen up to her neck. But it never had and never would be said of Betty Mae that she was a coward. Even if she had an immortal soul, a possibility considering infinite destinies, that could be imperiled by her determination to end evil on earth, she could and would not be deterred.

And in an echo of this conviction, Bolëk called to her, "You are a daughter of undefeated people! Get out of the Car!" He helped Estella to safety on the shore near the marsh, breathed life into Wind. He inflated the boat and stowed provisions. Then he danced, shook rattles and chanted. Before departing, he bent over Betty Mae and blew White Bear into the top

of her head where her fontanel had been, and she fell asleep in Estella's arms.

Estella yelled, "Momma, Momma, the baby's coming."

Celestial light filtered through livid dark-gray and deep-purple storm clouds pelting the earth with biting rain. Betty Mae, drenched, rainwater battering her face, obscuring her vision, sat on an embankment not far from her totaled Pontiac. Wind howled. Betty Mae beamed a swamp torch at her wolf-dog and saw her shake water from her dripping coat, run along the shore and jump into the boat, inflated, bobbing in swells. Branches of nearby bald cypress were bent by swirling forty-mile-per-hour winds that presaged the hurricane bearing down on them.

Betty Mae said, "What happened?"

"We hit an alligator," Estella said.

"I remember that," said Betty Mae.

"Between the contractions you inflated the boat, moved the gear out of the car."

"No," said Betty Mae, "That was your great-grandpapa, Bolëk—"

"No. Momma, you had a dream."

A dream? Was that all it had been? The supernova, the black hole, the hologram of infinite destinies at its singularity had been— just a dream? She reached into her pocket for a reality check and pulled out the aquamarine philosopher's egg that had been hurled into the interstellar medium by the exploding supergiant red star 160,000 years ago.

Betty Mae said, "Did Karl drive by?"

With labored breath, Estella said, "I poured sugar in his gas tank."

Betty Mae shined light between Estella's legs. Her rectum was open, her perineum stretched, but there was no appearance of the baby's head.

Propelled by ferocious winds raging at their backs and guided by the hurricane's own ominous light, Betty Mae used her boxwood-beavertail paddles to keep the inflated boat close to the shore and steered it back toward Ochopee where a culvert – five to six feet in diameter, tunneled beneath Highway 41 to allow Everglades' water to maintain its natural flow from north to south – would provide shelter. There Wind would dispatch rodents and other vermin, and Betty Mae would shoot any alligator or other menacing animal she couldn't chase away. Then, after clearing debris from the culvert, she'd hang a lantern from an overhead handrail and safe from

the hurricane in two feet of water, Estella would give birth to a son who would never breathe.

Estella, spent and in danger of hypothermia, would rest in the boat swaddled in warm clothes, grieving the death of her stillborn son with Betty Mae by her side. In the morning, all would be better than it had been before.

Sarah and Marcus, bringing Anthurium, holding hands, came to the hospital.

Estella proudly showed them her baby, a boy, a preemie, a prune, ugly as sin. “Meet your great-grandson, Andrew,” she said. “I named him for the hurricane.”

“An auspicious name,” Marcus said.

“Eagle is his power animal,” Sarah said.

“Like Dante’s,” said Betty Mae.

“Like whose?” said Estella.

“A great shaman,” said Sarah.

“A poet and a pilgrim,” said Betty Mae.

When they were alone, Sarah said to Betty Mae, “Thank The Creator there was no curse.”

“There was, Momma,” said Betty Mae, “there was.”

Sarah said, “If that were so . . .”

Listening to her momma in part but mostly not, Betty Mae recalled the hurricane sweeping away animals and uprooting trees along the Tamiami Trail while she, Estella, and Wind were safely ensconced in the culvert. When the baby came, Betty Mae was whelmed within his purple aura, blinded when the steel tube protecting them from the cyclonic winds burst into a spectrum of burning violet hues. From underwater where the newborn lay, a vortex sucked Betty Mae beneath the surface. The howls of her wolf-dog that began with the baby’s birth and the roar of the hurricane crescendoed until the sound resolved into the primal note struck by a first violinist to tune an orchestra preparing to play a concert under the stars. In the baby’s eyes – bluer than Gabe’s, greener than Estella’s – she saw a multitude of births, each imbued with a curse, some puissant, some impotent, some faint, some profound.

Each curse—a virtual duality of waves and particles, a vacuum fluctuation with a positive or negative charge—was paired with an anti-

curse to combine as a rainbow of curvilinear design, like a coil of DNA unzipping from the embrace of its double helix. The curses and the anti-curses spinning apart, sped through galaxies past red and blue supergiant stars, white dwarf stars, stars of every color of temperature on the main sequence, and neutron stars, through nebulae of supernovae and the horizon of a black hole, piercing the infinite densities and defying the absence of time at the singularity, where Betty Mae could no longer see them until, scattered elsewhere in disparate locales of the universe, the curses and anti-curses reappeared, continuing their journeys through the cosmos, enriched with the possibilities of infinite destinies.

The water in the culvert was rising fast; soon it would flood. Betty Mae thought quickly. She would put Estella in the boat with Wind and tent the tarps over them. She would move the boat out of the culvert, securing one end to a cypress tree and the other to a rung like the one from which the lantern hung.

From the maelstrom of creation, destruction, and infinite other possibilities imbuing her grandson resting underwater in the eye of a hurricane of his own, of her own volition she lifted him into the air, clamped and then cut the umbilical cord, wrapped him in a blanket, and opened his mouth to deliver his first breath.

“. . . and so,” Sarah said, “you had to know that the boy isn’t cursed.”

Betty Mae said, “The truth is, Momma, with good and evil, the difference can be ineffable.”

“What’s that mean?” said Sarah.

“*Verum ipsum factum*,” said Betty Mae. “It means that we may never know.”

Charlotte Crow

Charlotte Crow Abiaka – shaman, clinical psychologist, terminally ill – perched in the stern of her cedar-carved canoe. She squinted toward the horizon in the east to see through the glare of an already unrelenting sun—a nuclear furnace that would blaze for billions of years after the extinction of life on earth, a diurnal reminder of her fragile mortality. Vapors of swamp water rose from the marsh like steam from a geothermal pool. Her six-year-old great-nephew, Andrew Good-Eagle Godfrey – a face of stone, his body a statue – sat in the bow. Thirty, forty, and then fifty minutes slipped by as she rhythmically dipped the blade of her paddle into the water, drew it back, then crossed it over and pulled on the opposite side with synchronous precision.

They glided through sawgrass, passing pelicans and blue herons, swamp lilies, bald cypress, slash pines, a palette of orchids, and the lavender flowers of the carnivorous butterwort, the marsh awash with an abundance of turtles, alligators, swamp darters, tadpoles, and blue gills. Dragonflies and damselflies swarmed, butterflies fluttered, and orange-and-red striped arachnids threaded the hot-moist air.

Drops of sweat glistening on her forehead, scrolled down her cheeks as would tears shed by a child trying not to cry. Her gray braids adorned with nacre and hawk feathers were gone, an aftereffect of the chemotherapy, but she felt them brushing over her brown neck as if she'd never lost her hair. A scarf of cotton-patchwork cloth covered her bald head. The odor of insect repellant was revolting. But she tolerated it for the sake of the boy.

Eventually, her shoulders cramped, and she rested.

While canoeing, she'd experienced only muscular physicality. Resting, she felt the tumor growing in her brain, slowly but irrevocably crushing billions of neurons and thousands of synapses, severing signals sent to her vital organs that would soon, one after another, shutdown forever.

Sunlight sparked from dewdrops collected on broad leaves. Her reflection danced on the water in pockets of glittering light.

“Andrew,” she said, offering the boy her canteen, then insisting when he refused to drink. The boy was small for his age but strong, thin, a crop of lush black hair. He wore a Cub Scout shirt and was missing his two top-

front teeth. But his face was immobile, lifeless, morose. He showed no interest in the flock of wood storks alighted in the uppermost branches of a nearby grove of strangler figs, a snail kite soaring overhead with a Butterfly Peacock Bass, at least ten pounds, twitching in its talons, or even the manatee munching plants on the floor of the swamp.

The boy had been mute for four weeks, since Charlotte Crow had pried him from his father's corpse. The skin of the boy's father was turning from brown to a purpled gray, his lifeless eyes open wide, his mouth agape. Charlotte Crow had tried but couldn't close his frozen jaws. The best she could manage with his eyes was to lower them partway.

Charlotte Crow covered Karl's body with a blanket. "An overdose," she said, moving the corpse to reveal a syringe still inserted in his calf. The boy, one hand still clutching his father's body, shouted, "No!" His breath carrying the word – "No" – was seized in a mighty talon of Eagle, his power animal. The Great Bird took flight, holding in its other talon a vision of violence that had recently frightened the boy.

Was it a vision of something from his memories, perhaps of his father's deliriums or outbursts, like the ones that had forced his mother to file a complaint with his parole officer? Perhaps it had been a scene from one of those glorifying-violence TV shows that were all the rage— bloodthirsty U.S. cavalrymen raiding Indian villages, slaughtering out-gunned brave Native American warriors, trampling squaws and screaming children beneath their horses' hooves, or a homicidal homicide detective investigating one of his own murders. Or maybe the purloined vision was what the boy had seen, or thought he'd seen, the night before, when his father, in violation of the terms of his parole, had shown up drunk and had tried to force his way into their home.

When the boy was disturbed, he could summon powerful forces from hidden reality. Uncontrolled, these forces could cause substantial harm, even death, forces that so far had been kept at bay by Eagle. With Eagle gone, there was no way to know how great a menace the boy could be – to himself, to others – especially in his emotional state since losing his voice.

Charlotte Crow's ordinary-reality diagnosis of the boy's inability to speak would have been post-traumatic stress with an optimistic prognosis that psychotherapy twice a week would lead to an eventual if not early adjustment that would accompany acceptance of the loss, enabling the boy to manage his grief and to reclaim his voice from the shock of unexpected

tragedy and the ensuing trauma that had deprived him of it. But Charlotte Crow had seen Eagle take the boy's voice, requiring a diagnosis beyond the purview of Western mental healthcare.

What was necessary, what the boy needed, was a journey with Charlotte Crow to the underworld where they would find and retrieve his voice. The boy's mother hadn't been consulted. Betty Mae had strongly opposed her sister's plan. The risk of the boy seeing the vision purloined by Eagle was too great. As Eagle had taken the vision, there was good reason to keep it from the boy.

"While Eagle has the vision," Charlotte Crow had said, "the boy doesn't have Eagle. Without Eagle, there will be violence."

"When he recovers from the trauma, his voice will return," Betty Mae had said.

Charlotte Crow said, "Why don't you stick to philosophy or cosmology or whatever it is that you do?"

Betty Mae rejoined, saying, "With whom are you actually angry?"

It wasn't Betty Mae's opposition that had caused Charlotte Crow to wait four weeks to take the boy on a shamanic journey to the Lowerworld. Before this day, she'd been too weak to travel. But on this day Golden Bear, her power animal, had brought her respite from the disabling pain and fatigue. And surely The Creator had Her reasons for this gift of relapse.

A swath of Florida's southeast coast six to twelve miles wide from Miami-Dade County in the south to Palm Beach County in the north, from the City of Homestead, the southernmost community of the Miami Metropolitan area, to the town of Jupiter, the northernmost community of Palm Beach County, had been dredged, drained, paved over, and built up with low-rise office buildings and shopping malls so that the cityscapes – landscapes, hardscapes, and architecture – of any particular commercial or residential zone were indistinguishable from the others. Those adjacent areas that had been spared the destruction of development that decimated native flora and fauna, a near sea-level plain of saw palmetto, pine stands, and swampland, likewise were mostly indistinguishable from each other.

It was here, within this homogenized terrain, in the affluent City of Coral Gables, that Dr. Charlotte Crow Abiaka maintained offices for her practices of shamanism and clinical psychology, and so it was here that she was called upon to determine if the mental, emotional, and therefore spiritual

problems of her patients were indistinguishable one from another's once they'd been categorized, cataloged, and compartmentalized as the American Psychiatric Association would have it, as the American Psychological Association would have it, as health insurance companies and employers providing health insurance would have it: assignment to one or more diagnoses with numerical descriptors in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Was one person's depression indistinguishable from another person's save for the degree or extent of the disorder? Not in Charlotte Crow's view or experience. She developed patient-care plans based on the etiology rather than the specific symptoms of their emotional troubles.

Insight into Charlotte Crow's scholarship, experimental techniques, and her reasoning could be found in the eclectic books that she'd savored, treasured, and shelved in her offices: by Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*; by Sophocles, *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*; by Sigmund Freud, *Sexuality and Love* and *Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia*; by Marjory Stoneham Douglas, *The Everglades: River of Grass*; and by Mimerose P. Beaubrun *Nan Dòmi: An Intimate's Journey into Haitian Vodou*. Her scholastic and experimental inquires greatly inspired by these authors and their oeuvres had shown that often a patient's recovery was hindered more than helped by a pigeonholed diagnosis or by assembly-line, health-insurance-approved treatment predicated on symptomology.

Western medicine – the prescription of psychotropic drugs and psychotherapy – were often insufficient to heal emotional damage to the psyche or to a relationship regardless of its cause: trauma, genetic disorder, errant brain chemistry, or garden-variety dishonesty or treachery. This was why, in her practice of shamanism, Charlotte Crow traveled with Golden Bear into hidden reality in search of palliatives that could contribute to cures for her patients. Now, three months before Karl's death, she was conducting final sessions with her patients, as there was no escaping the fact that soon she'd be too ill to help them, too ill to help herself. And so she'd not be able to complete her work with some of them even if all that remained was travel in hidden reality to gain insight.

One patient that Charlotte Crow believed she could have helped if she'd had the time, which she did not, was Hailey Levine Rosen, 39, five feet four inches tall, one hundred fifteen pounds, a high school English teacher, an

avid tennis player, married to Al Rosen going on ten years – an attractive, beautiful actually, quick, compassionate, clever, delightful woman – who was then in session with Charlotte Crow.

Hailey had begun psychotherapy because of unremitting feelings of guilt caused by her extramarital affair. She was in love, but not with Al, so she had no intention of breaking off the affair. Her dilemma, as she saw it, was whether to tell him.

Hailey's sex life with Al had become unsatisfying. He hadn't done anything wrong, anything other than failing to keep her interest. He was a star at work, the young president of a bank that had branches throughout the south. But he was clueless about Hailey's feelings of loss of intimacy, loss of the connection between spouses that the best of marriage has to offer. He had no clue that anything was amiss, no clue that he was missing anything. And so, perhaps, he wasn't missing a thing. But Hailey, in near constant conflict and turmoil, was missing a great deal.

At this juncture, Hailey had firmly resolved– her exact word had been “resolutely” – never to tell Al. Once words are spoken, she'd decided, they couldn't be taken back. And as she was never going to leave Al as he had done nothing wrong, she would never speak the words.

It was too early in her therapy for Hailey to come to terms with the fact that her silence coupled with the continuation of the affair deprived Al of the decision of whether to leave, deprived Al of a fair opportunity to assess his marriage, assess his life.

Hailey's infidelity and silence were injuring her psyche, injury that possibly could be averted if Charlotte Crow had the strength to travel in hidden reality on her patient's behalf. The best Charlotte Crow could do in this, her final session with Hailey, was to try to elevate her perspective by saying to her, “So you're sentencing yourself to a lifetime of silence?”

Hailey didn't respond.

“You've made a decision for now,” said Charlotte Crow. “But it's a decision you'll be able to revisit.”

“No,” said Hailey, thoughtfully, “you're right. It is a life sentence. It's a burden I'll bear. But not alone.” She gave Charlotte Crow a warm smile. “I can always talk to you.”

“We have to talk about that,” said Charlotte Crow.

Resuming her labors, with Andrew still looking unwaveringly straight ahead, Charlotte Crow paddled deeper into the swamp. Approaching the gateway to the Lowerworld, she turned her paddle sideways and braced it against the gunwale to swing the canoe beneath a canopy between hardwood hammocks. Without any indication that he was about to move, Andrew stood, then toppled over the side. A cottonmouth water moccasin, tan with gray-and-black diamond stripes, slid into the water and undulated toward the boy.

Charlotte Crow dipped the paddle and pulled back hard. As the rear of canoe came around, she lifted Andrew into the boat. The viper came out of the water too, twisting in a spiral, fangs locked in the flesh of the boy's arm. With her hunting knife, she quickly decapitated the snake, then pried off its mouth and tossed the snake's head and still writhing body overboard. A cloud of bloody bubbles percolated while the snake's flesh was quickly stripped from its skeleton in a frenzy of feeding fish.

Skin on the boy's arm fringing the wound seared. He turned cold; his pulse raced.

Charlotte Crow tore off her blouse to make a tourniquet. Goosebumps covered her breasts, her maroon areolas shriveled, her nipples were erect. The boy's eyes fluttered as she tied the knot. She sucked blood and venom from his arm and spit the warm fluids over the gunwales. His eyes glazed, then closed.

Aunt Charlotte Crow's breasts glow like shining twin moons framed in the soft orange-red light of sunset. From one of her nipples a sweet liquid drips and spreads across a cupped hand like cream poured over a cake. She cradles Andrew, lifts a teat to his mouth. He sucks on it as a hungry infant would. Despite the succor, he is freezing in the moist heat, the air putrid with an odor of decay.

In the distance he hears bones tumble – *tic- a- tic- a- tic- a- tic* – slowly at first and then faster and faster and louder and louder, the rattling sound is punctuated by a high-pitched whistle: *shree- shree- sheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee*

The rhythmic beat of a drum joins the sound of the tumbling bones and shrieking whistle: ***tom-pom-pom-pom***

The beat booms faster and faster, louder and louder until the sounds subside into the faint echo of his beating heart.

At night Andrew sits on a bed of blankets on a chickee deep in a hardwood hammock, sipping tea. Aunt Charlotte Crow shows him a hollow in a buttonwood tree growing alongside the chickee. The hollow teems with aquatic plants in water so clear he sees through its depths to roots dangling above a sandy bottom.

She says, "You will swim with Golden Bear to the Lowerworld. There you will find Eagle."

He nods.

"In the Lowerworld, everything will be alive and strange things may talk to you: rocks, trees, birds, even the sea. Don't listen. When you find Eagle, he will be wrestling with a vision. Don't look at it. I will take the vision from Eagle and Eagle and Golden Bear will take you back to ordinary reality."

He nods again.

"When The Creator made the Middleworld, Dog could talk," Aunt Charlotte Crow says, beginning the narration of a Seminole fable. "He lived with our ancestor, Jeremiah, a powerful medicine man, and his wife, the African princess and shaman, Akila, one of your ancestors. Early in their marriage, Jeremiah often went on long walks late at night, making Akila unhappy. So she sent Dog to follow Jeremiah. In the next village Jeremiah lay beside a young woman. Dog ran home and told Akila.

"When Jeremiah came home, Akila cast a spell on him. He stopped wandering at night and then the marriage was good. But Jeremiah was angry. He said to Dog, 'I know it was you,' and he took Dog's voice away. Now Dog's voice is gone forever. Dog will never speak again."

Golden Bear climbs on to the chickee, nuzzles Andrew.

Aunt Charlotte Crow says, "You will find your voice in the Lowerworld, but like Dog you will lose it forever if you tell anyone what you did or saw there."

Aunt Charlotte Crow turns on a tape recorder. It plays steady drumming augmented by the sound of bones tumbling in a rattle and the shrill of a whistle, the cadence and sounds a reprise of a song his grandmamma often listens to: "Highway 61 Revisited."

Aunt Charlotte Crow lights candles, lies on the floor of the chickee, and closes her eyes.

Golden Bear leads Andrew to the vibrant water pooling in the hollow. Aunt Charlotte Crow sleeps and Andrew tries calling out to her, but his constricted throat won't allow his voice to pass. Following Golden Bear, he dives into the water in the hollow of the buttonwood tree and swims toward the sand below. Bubbles form pockets of air, allowing him to breathe; his clothes adhere like a second skin. Branches wrap around his ankles, pulling him back, urging him in gurgling whispers, "Don't go."

Golden Bear frees him, and Andrew sinks gently as a pearl would through a flask of shampoo until, abreast of the roots he spills into air and spins heels over head into daylight and on to the expanse of an orange beach. Fires light the crests of waves. Clouds, the color of dewberries, float by.

Eagle flies back and forth: out to sea and then back over the beach. In his talons he holds a livid cloud, slashing it with his beak as if it were a scythe. In the surf, Golden Bear leaps and swipes an open-clawed paw at the cloud.

Andrew runs toward Eagle—arms flailing, legs pumping, heart pounding. The sand is cold. The roar of the ocean waves crescendo. The aquamarine seawater becomes ash-gray.

The wind carries an odor like the smell of turpentine. Swirling grains of sand become a cyclone of vermin that lift Andrew off the beach, swarm over him until Eagle beats the pests with his wings, freeing Andrew, who falls back onto the orange beach.

Trapped within the plum-colored cloud held in Eagle's talons is Andrew's purloined vision: his mother fighting with his father, who is ill and weak. His father struggles.

"Help me, son," he says, falling to the bed of the cloud, he extends an arm toward Andrew, rolling until he lies prone, his face toward his son. "Help me."

Andrew wants to cry out, "No! Momma. No!" But the vise gripping his throat tightens.

His mother leaps upon his father's back, sinks her viper fangs into his arm. Shrieking, his father struggles to his knees, writhes, then collapses into the posture of a fetus, bleeding within the embrace of the ominous cloud. His mother's eyes blaze yellow and red like molten lava, a silvery

musical laugh dances on her blood-smeared lips. Triumphant she stands over Andrew's vanquished father.

Aunt Charlotte Crow leaps into the sky, seizes the cloud, and yells, "Run, Andrew. Run!"

Andrew runs back across the beach, his feet bruised, his breath short. He stumbles. Eagle lifts and carries him to roots dangling above a clear-water pool spread across the orange sand beneath the base of the buttonwood tree. The power animals and the boy dive in. Andrew floats to the surface. When he climbs out of the hollow, the chickee still glows in candlelight.

Aunt Charlotte Crow is asleep, her clothing soaking wet like his own. He undresses her, staring at her breasts, her purple nipples. He dries her, covers her with blankets, then takes off his clothes, lies beside her under the blankets, and sleeps.

In the morning, Andrew awakes to the sight of what can only be Aunt Charlotte Crow's corpse, swathed in brightly colored Seminole cloth, bobbing in her canoe. He gags on an odor of death. The air is humid and already hot, the light a brightening gray. Betty Mae takes the tape recorder and stashes it in a canvas bag.

"Aunt Charlotte Crow," Andrew cries. He runs toward her canoe but Betty Mae, quick as a cobra's strike, steps in front of him.

"Did she die, Grandmamma? Did she?"

Sotto voce Betty Mae whispers thanks to The Creator for returning Andrew's voice, hugs her grandson, then holds him at arms' length.

"There was a water snake," he says.

"Yes," says Betty Mae, examining the wound. "Tell me about the snake."

Through tears, he tells her about falling out of Aunt Charlotte Crow's canoe, the snake bite, then awakening to see Aunt Charlotte Crow, shrouded, laying in her canoe. He says nothing of his journey to the Lowerworld.

"The Creator has called her home," Betty Mae says. "It was her time."

"Was it father's time?" Andrew says.

"Yes," Betty Mae says. She puts the remnants of the candles in her canvas bag and puts the bag beside Aunt Charlotte Crow in her canoe.

"When the brave Seminoles were killed by the soldiers that President Jackson sent to Florida, was it their time?"

“My, my,” says Betty Mae. “You are your old self. Questions, questions.” She regards the boy for a few moments. Then she says, “Sometimes people die before their time, like in war. The Creator has given us the power to take life and the wisdom to make it better.”

Betty Mae takes sacred leaves from a pouch looped through by a rope belt tied around her waist, drops them in a fire, and fans the flames until there is white smoke. She takes rattles from her canoe, shows Andrew how to shake them. She shows him the steps of the Dance of the Dead, and they shake the rattles, dancing around and through the smoke as they chant.

She scatters feathers of songbirds into the hot air. Carried by the wing-like rhythms of the bones tumbling in the rattles, the feathers float upwards with Aunt Charlotte Crow’s spirit— liquid crystal light rising from her body. With Golden Bear her spirit soars, then plunges into the water pooling in the hollow of the buttonwood tree, riding her power animal up through the core of the trunk, out through its uppermost branches, mingling with the rising feathers and wisps of cloud-white smoke.

Rain falls. Betty Mae lashes Aunt Charlotte Crow’s canoe to her own, and with Andrew, wearing a too-large waterproof poncho and a floppy hat, sitting in the bow, she paddles away from the hardwood hammock, away from the buttonwood tree. As the canoes glide through the swamp back past the herons and snapping turtles, the swamp darters and the dragonflies, Andrew asks about the flora and fauna, Charlotte Crow’s spirit, and the Upperworld.

“Did Aunt Charlotte Crow play the tape; did you listen to it?”

Andrew says nothing.

“Did you go into the hollow?”

Silence.

“Have you lost your voice again?”

“No,” he says.

Betty Mae’s wolf-dog, Wind, crouches on her forelegs and haunches on her back porch. In the backyard, Betty Mae sits in a wrought-iron chair at a round wrought-iron table, reading and making notes. Luxury sailing yachts and cabin cruisers motor by in the Intracoastal Waterway behind her home.

It’s early, an hour past dawn. The sun, an orange areola on a cerulean breast, already sizzles. Rainbows flicker in the spray of sprinklers rotating back and forth, watering the lawn in wide semicircles.

Wild green parrots hop in a hollow in the lawn filled with sprinkler water, bathing, squawking, until a broad-winged hawk swoops, snatching one of them in its raptor talons. The surprised prey – its life ebbing – squawks as the other parrots pester and dive-bomb the hawk to no avail.

Barefoot, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, Andrew runs through the sprinklers. He steps in the muddy water of the erstwhile bird bath, slips, and falls. He wipes his face, smearing it with mud, steps out of his shorts. Then, in his briefs and wet T-shirt, he chases a sprinkler's spray like a greyhound after a mechanical rabbit. When the sprinkler reverses direction, he becomes the rabbit, running from the oncoming water, arced like a wave.

When he tires of the game, he calls, "Here, Wind!"

The wolf-dog stands, arches her arthritic back, yawns, and stretches. She trots down the steps. Andrew runs. Wind chases, runs around him until he collapses on the lawn, laughing. Wind licks his face. Then he grabs a baseball bat and smacks Wind, the blow glancing off her snout.

On his feet, Andrew swings the bat again, this time holding it with two hands, aiming at the wolf-dog's face. Betty Mae steps between them, catching the blow on her thigh. She grabs the bat and flings it across the yard over a hibiscus hedge, then reaches for Andrew, but he slips away, ducking under her hand, dashing after the bat. Wind cuts him off, stopping abruptly in front of him. He veers, trips, falls, and cries as a sprinkler douses him.

Betty Mae scoops up Andrew. Heading for the house, she holds him fast as he squirms and screams. Wind follows them up the steps, across the porch, through the screen door, and into a bathroom, where Betty Mae draws a bath.

She places Andrew in the tub.

When she steps out of the room, he stands. Wind growls and he sits down, trembling though he's stopped crying. He removes his T-shirt and underpants and washes off the mud.

Betty Mae returns with a towel and dry clothes for Andrew and a towel for Wind. She rubs down the dog while Andrew dresses.

"Why did you hit Wind?"

"She won't talk."

"She talks," Betty Mae says. "Tells us when she's hungry; warns us when there's danger. So why are you angry with her?"

"Aunt Charlotte Crow knows," is all the boy will say.

Billie

This time Andrew aims his baseball bat at a baseball in a Little League game. Earlier in the day it rained, enhancing the pungency of the freshly mowed field. Threatening maroon-tinged gray cumulus clouds float overhead. The light is soft; the air is humid and hot.

Andrew has been a student of baseball since he was five, the year the Florida Marlins first won the World Series. Now at ten in the bottom of the ninth inning with two outs and a player on base, he holds the bat slightly choked, his knuckles aligned, his grip firm but not tight. He puts all his strength into the swing, taking one step forward as the bat comes around.

The boys in the league are ages ten to twelve. Andrew's best friend, Billie Bower, age twelve, is on deck. They are the only boys in their school with Seminole blood. Andrew is the only boy with African blood. They are in the same sixth-grade class because Andrew has skipped two grades. He is the shortest boy on either team; Billie, already six inches taller than Andrew, is the strongest and tallest. They have a bond forged in violence, murder, and silence.

Jimmie Bower, Billie's father, was more than half Seminole, as Karl Godfrey, Andrew's father, had been. Jimmie, like Karl, spent time in prison. And as Karl had, Jimmie loved his son fiercely when he was sober, which, as with Karl, was infrequent.

After as Andrew was riding his bicycle home, three of his classmates – twelve-years old and white – knocked him off his bike. Neil Baker, the largest ruffian, kicked Andrew on his thigh close to his pelvis. The pain was severe.

Neil said, "Nigger, you come back to our school, we'll kick in your teeth."

The attackers didn't see or feel a hot, purple light rise from the sidewalk. Nor did they see Eagle beating his wings, quelling the light, not allowing it to ignite. But they did see Billie Bower approaching quickly. Neil stepped back and as he did, Billie threw a punch that landed on his ear, knocking him to the ground, where he lay beside Andrew. Before Billie

could throw a punch at either of the other boys, they were already on their bikes, peddling for purchase.

“Is he dead?” Andrew said.

“Oh, crap,” Billie said. “Your front wheel is bent.”

Neil, rising from the pavement, said, “Bower, you fucking Nigger lover. You’re dead.”

Savagely, Billie kicked the boy, knocking him back down.

This fight was the first of several. But like their Seminole ancestors, because they were vigilant and worked as a team, Billie and Andrew were undefeated in their microcosm of the racist milieu that permeated Florida, persistent racism that imbued white society from well before the state’s 1860 secession from the Union that made it one of the original seven Confederate States.

It was the same prejudice that spawned the Overtown and Liberty City riots in the early 1980s that followed the judicially sanctioned (by an all-white jury) police murder of Arthur McDuffie, an unarmed young black man; that had continued through and beyond the judicially sanctioned (by yet another all non-black jury) vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager shot down as he was returning home from a 7-Eleven where he’d gone to purchase candy.

Andrew and every other young black man that he knew was always aware of white people eyeing him with suspicion in public places.

If Andrew were convicted of a crime of violence, to mitigate his punishment at the sentencing phase of the trial, would his lawyers call upon experts – sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists – to testify that rampant racism was responsible at least in part for his anti-social behavior? Possibly. But if Charlotte Crow had lived, she would have disputed that Andrew’s acts of violence were to any extent caused by his environment.

Not long after Billie defended Andrew from his sixth-grade after-school assailants, there was another incident of violence and another secret that the boys would carry to their graves. It began innocently enough on a Saturday morning. Jimmie Bower took Billie and Andrew fishing. They stowed bait, tackle, rods, reels, and a cooler containing sandwiches, soft drinks, and a twelve-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon into Jimmie’s twenty-foot fiberglass tri-hull boat, which had no top, open like a canoe. When they backed out of the boat’s slip in the Dinner Key marina, Jimmy was sober.

By the time they ate their sandwiches under a cloudless sky and a sun burning the air as a blast furnace would, Jimmie had finished six cans of beer. The boys went swimming and when they climbed back on the boat, Jimmie had finished the twelve pack.

Using small crabs as bait for the bonefish they hoped to catch, the boys cast out their lines. But Jimmie, unstable on his feet in the gently rocking boat, jammed a hook into his forefinger.

“You shit,” he yelled. “I told you. No hard shells.” Then he backhanded Billie, hitting him on his jaw, opening a cut on his lower lip, breaking his two-front-bottom teeth.

Jimmie raised his rod, aiming at his son’s head. Billie’s tearing eyes were riveted on the ribbed interior of the hull. A flash of charged ultra-violet light struck Jimmie’s chest like a battering ram, knocking him into the water.

Andrew jumped overboard and forced Jimmie’s mouth open, causing him to swallow bay water as if he were breathing it.

Billie jumped out of the boat, swam to his father and pulled him to the surface. By then, Jimmie was dead.

“You weren’t strong enough to pull him to the surface,” Billie said. “Don’t blame yourself for not saving him. And please. Don’t tell anyone he hit me.”

Andrew had knocked Jimmie out of the boat with intent to kill, a homicidal impulse. But why? Why hadn’t he just knocked Jimmie out of the boat? He never understood why he’d killed Jimmie. And he’d never know that by killing his first Indian, he’d fulfilled in part the prophesy his great-grandmamma, Sarah Abiaka, made just two hours before his birth: if he lived, he would kill other Indians. It would be a decade before he would kill another Indian.

Billie piloted the little fishing boat back to the marina, with Jimmie’s body still in the water, tied to a cleat on the gunwale. As if reading Andrew’s thoughts, he said with a maturity common to children who’ve been abused, “If he’d gotten back on the boat, he’d have killed us.” He ran his tongue over his broken teeth.

But Billie hadn’t read all of Andrew’s thoughts. Andrew was thinking about training Billie to travel in hidden reality.

Billie told the police that when he jumped out of the boat, trying to rescue his father, he’d hit his mouth on the gunwale, cutting his lip,

breaking his teeth.

At the time of his death, Jimmie's blood-alcohol level was 2.8, almost three times greater than the level of legal intoxication.

At the inquest, the bruise on Jimmie's chest and his broken ribs were explained by Billie's mother, who said, truthfully, that Jimmie had fallen from a ladder that morning while trimming trees, said he wasn't hurt, and had refused to see a doctor. The medical examiner was dubious, but seeing no other logical explanation, he ruled that Jimmie had drowned and that his intoxication was a contributing cause.

At home plate, Andrew had begun his swing late but his bat hits the ball solidly and drives it inbounds down the first-base line for a single. Billie walks to the plate and hits the next pitch over the fence, winning the game with a walk-off home run.

Part III Georges



Twentieth Century Fox

I was waiting in Family Law Court in downtown Los Angeles, my gut ablaze. Did that disqualify me from representing myself in my own uncontested divorce? A year earlier, Beatrice had moved out of our home in Malibu, the home she'd insisted we buy because she loved listening to the ocean.

I couldn't clear my head of the good times, our plans to travel, our plans to grow old together. Maybe I misunderstood the vows we made at the altar. Maybe what we'd promised was 'til half-death do us part. Maybe we'd been incarcerated by marriage. Maybe Bea's jailbreak would trigger mine. Maybe the dissolution would be a healthy break with the past.

And then I dwelled on the distant past, on young love, on first love.

I wasn't hurrying, I wasn't late, I was ambling along a corridor of Coral Gables High in my proverbial male-adolescent self-absorption – thinking baseball, actually – when Aurora and I collided. I lost my footing, fell backwards to the floor. She said it was my fault, losing my bearings because I was gawking at her chest. She was wearing a very short red skirt and a sparkling red spandex top, the head of a metallic-silver comet covering each breast, the tails – trailing toward her trim waist – accentuating her curves. She was hot, sexy to a fault. But the fault wasn't mine; I never saw her before she ran into me.

My homework fell out of my notebooks, scattered over the terrazzo floor. Aurora scooped up the pages. The glitter in her fingernail polish caught the light, her red pumps shredding most of my work.

She said, "Georges, are you okay?"

When I think of Aurora now, I still see myself at sixteen riveted by her shapely long legs. She had classic beauty, the face of Venus di Milo. On bright days, the sun highlighted deep purple hues, like black currant, in her long dark curls. Every boy in the school knew who she was. Everyone knew her name. I was thrilled to hear her say mine.

"Stop!" I said.

She planted a foot between my knees, clasped my arm. Helping me to my feet, she leaned close, her tongue trembling between parted lips,

spearmint breath.

A chorus of giggles from her clique shattered the moment. They were the alpha girls with a puzzling exception— Hailey Levine, the sister of my best friend, Bruce. She wore oversize blouses to hide her chubby body. He was an athlete, upstanding, like his dad, a math and science teacher and the manager of our baseball team. Bruce and Hailey's father, like mine, was an America-can-do-no-wrong patriot. She was a hippie, counter-culture, flouting American values, the American dream. I imagined her teasing Bruce because I'd been flattened by a girl.

"Losers," I said.

"You should know," Aurora said. "Still a virgin."

"I'm not— a virgin," I said.

Boys gathered and jeered – "Did you see that?" "She knocked him on his butt."

"Are you stoned?" I said to Aurora.

"Oh, a tough guy," she said, slapping me on the shoulder. "I like that in a man," she said. "But you're just a boy."

"And I suppose you're Miss Maturity," I said. The words had barely left my lips when she laughed.

That's when Roger Knox – a co-captain of the football team, a stoner with a giant flop of red hair, three inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than I – grabbed the front of my baseball jersey.

"Is this creep bothering you?" he said.

Aurora said, "Roger, get lost."

Roger was popular, perhaps for the very reason I detested him: he never missed an opportunity to take center stage. But I wasn't thinking about disliking Roger as he shook me.

As if snatching a barbell, I brought up my arms, breaking his hold, knocking him backward. He looked surprised as he hit a wall of lockers with a clang, but he didn't retaliate, not immediately. He just rubbed his elbow, grinning and nodding toward me as if saluting, then looking away, indicating the scuffle was over. The next moment he whirled back toward me, swinging his fist. I dodged his blow, which was aimed at my face, and it hit me squarely on the shoulder.

"Bohem," he said, "you're dead."

He threw a go-for-broke haymaker. I ducked under it, then putting my weight into an uppercut, hit him just below his ribcage. With a whoosh, the

air knocked out of him, he doubled over, heaving.

Aurora's eyes grew wide. Mr. Padilla, our math teacher – a string bean physique, the face of a moldy pumpkin, pockmarked and discolored – gripped the back of my collar.

“Clear the hall,” he said. “Roger. The principal's office.”

“Miss Goldin,” he said to Aurora. “What are you doing in that shameful —”

She leaned toward him. “I lost my propellers,” she said, in a near whisper, a conspiratorial tone, “and Georges was helping me find them.” She gave him a look, as if inviting him into the conspiracy, as if now he too would join the hunt for the missing propellers. “You know,” she said, looking around as if expecting to find them, “not all comets are jet-propelled.”

“An astounding discovery,” Mr. Padilla said. “Shall we share it with your mother?”

“She knows,” Aurora said, and with her heels clacking on the hard-stone floor, she walked away, her girlfriends swarming around her like drones protecting their queen. And she quickly disappeared into a whirlwind of students—poof—she vanished into thin air.

“Helene has her hands full with that one.” He was referring to Aurora's mother, Mrs. Goldin, an English teacher at our school.

“Tomorrow we play the Panthers,” I said. “Got to go, sir.” And I too walked away.

He called out, “Georges Bohem. You. Come. Back. Here.”

But it wasn't his voice I heard, it was my father's, telling me my clothes were mismatched, my attitude bad, I'd screwed up again. But inspired by Aurora's aplomb, I didn't look back.

When I stepped outside, Bruce was leaning against the building, waiting for me. I expected him to chide me for embarrassing myself before Hailey and her friends. But he didn't. Instead, good naturedly, he slapped me on the back of the shoulder.

“She likes you,” he said.

“Who? Aurora?”

“You been decked by another girl lately?” We walked toward the gym. He said, “She's no good.”

“What's wrong with her?”

“She’s bad news. Forget her. Are you still psyched by your hitting slump?” I looked away, feeling queasy. “It’s all mental,” he said. When we reached the locker room, he said, “Have you been getting enough sleep?”

“I’m not losing sleep over my hitting.”

“Something’s bothering you,” he said.

“I was thinking about the game. It’s the playoffs—”

“Just stay loose.”

“All right. So what’s wrong with Aurora?”

Other boys crowded into the locker room, so Bruce pulled me aside to speak privately.

“She has a bad rep.”

I’d known him all my life. When he said something, he meant it. But I didn’t want to believe him.

“Who says?”

“She runs with a crowd of older guys I know. She— you know. She does it.”

“What about you and Abbi?” I said. “You do it.”

“We only go to third base.”

“Wait a sec,” I said. But before I could say another word, several of our teammates surrounded us, congratulating me for my victory over Roger.

The next morning we knew there would be college scouts in the capacity crowd. During the pre-game throw-around Bruce threw a grounder to me between second and third base. It should have been routine, an easy play, but I was startled by jeers from Roger and his pot-smoking buddies. The ball ricocheted off my glove.

Sitting above them in the bleachers, Aurora and her friends were chanting, “Go, Georges!”

I kicked at the dirt, pretending something on the field caused the ball to take a bad hop.

Roger shouted, “Hey, Bohem, try out for the girls’ team!”

My father, our first base coach, gestured for me to come over and talk to him.

“That was a fluke,” I said, “a sudden wind gust.”

“Your fielding’s first-rate. Your Hitting?” he said. “You’re swinging the bat like a grandmother.”

“A little slump,” I said.

“Son,” he said, “slumps are for sissies.”

In the stands, Aurora waved.

Orange monarchs fluttered, circling each other, kissing.

“I’ll get a damn hit,” I said.

He squeezed my arm. “Watch your mouth, son. There’s no call for that kind of talk.”

I pulled away and walked to the pitcher’s mound to join Bruce and Eric, our second baseman, who were talking to Manny, our pitcher. I was surrounded by guys who’d gone all the way with their steady girlfriends, and I’d never even had the nerve to ask a girl out. The verve I’d felt standing up to my father was as fleeting as the moment of the monarchs mating.

The Panthers’ shortstop lined the first pitch over the left-field fence for a home run. Manny walked the second batter and struck out the third. The next batter swung early at a curveball but connected solidly, driving it hard to my left. I caught it off a bounce and flipped it to Eric at second. Eric tagged the base, then riffled it to Bruce at first for a double play. It was virtuosity, every note played in perfect three-part harmony: Tinkers to Evers to Chance, Georges to Eric to Bruce. But Roger and his cohort were on their feet screaming, “Lucky play, loser.” Aurora and her friends cheered.

Bruce and Manny headed for the bleachers, but my dad and Coach Levine stopped them.

In the first inning, I went down swinging for the third out. The razzing from our side of the bleachers drowned out the cheers from the Panthers’ side. My dad went into the stands. The next time I looked, Roger and his stoner friends were gone.

In the bottom of the fourth I popped up; it was an easy catch for the shortstop. I was hit by a pitch in the seventh.

It felt great to be on base until my father said, “You still haven’t gotten a hit.” I took a large lead but he motioned me back. His hand on my shoulder, he said, “Outstanding field play: baseball-scholarship potential. Extra batting practice and you’ll be fine.”

Bruce hit a line drive deep into right field. The third-base coach tried to hold me up, but I came around the base thinking that our season was on the line.

The Panthers' catcher caught a relay, then, seeing me coming, crouched, blocking the plate. I barreled into him, knocking him over and the ball out of his glove. Through a haze of dust and the knot of our tangled legs, I reached out, tagged home, and the ump yelled, "Safe!" My shoulder was on fire.

Three to one in the bottom of the ninth, two outs, I was on-deck when Eric hit a line-drive single, bringing home the runner on second. My teammates were standing at the chain-link fence in front of the bench. Coach Levine looked at me and waved me back.

"Georges, I'm putting in Buster to pinch hit," he said.

"Coach, I'll get on base."

Bruce joined us. "What's going on?" he said. His dad looked at Buster, swinging his bat in the on-deck circle. He looked at the kids jeering and cheering in the bleachers, and then looked at Buster again. Bruce said, "Georges can do it, Dad. Don't take him out."

Coach Levine wiped his face with a sleeve, looked at the scoreboard, the Panthers' pitcher, my father. He said, "Georges, can you pull it down the third-base line?"

When I stepped up to the plate I was expecting a knuckleball, but the pitcher threw a fast one, high and inside; I swung and missed. His second pitch was an outside curveball that I punched down the first base line out of play. The pitcher threw three more outside curveballs; I checked my swing each time.

The pitcher shook off two calls before winding for his pitch. Eric took off for second as the pitcher let the ball go. I started my swing late, expecting an outside curveball, but I guessed wrong. The pitch was a fastball, high and inside. I brought my bat around for a full swing; the ball hit the bat a good six inches below the sweet spot, and I hit a blooper that the first baseman would have caught easily had he not been holding Eric in check at first. The second baseman dove for the ball, just missing it, and it fell into shallow right field for a hit. The second baseman got tangled up with the right fielder as they fought for the ball. The third-base coach waved Eric home. The score was tied.

Two pitches later Bruce punished a fastball, smacking it deep into center field for a double. My father pumped the air with his fist as I scored the winning run.

Bruce and I had post-game plans, but his dad called him into his office as we were leaving the locker room. Hailey was in his office, and Coach Levine didn't look happy. But when he saw me he smiled and said, "How's the shoulder, Georges?"

I told Bruce I'd wait for him in the quad.

I haven't been back to Gables High since graduation, but I used to tell Bea that I could picture the quad as vividly as if I'd seen it yesterday. It was a garden of native palms, lush lawns, statues of Conquistadors, and a four-tier fountain rising from a base in the shape of a Mediterranean cross.

I'd been working on an essay due the following week. The assignment was to argue whether *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was racist. When Aurora sat down next to me in the quad, I was reading the novel and thinking that the way people treated each other hadn't really changed much since Huck Finn was a boy. My father had told me that to the great shame of our state and our city, almost two decades after *Brown v. Board of Education* there were still only a handful black students among the 3,000 students at Gables High. School buses bringing white and Cuban-American kids to Gables passed George Washington Carver High, an all-black high school on Dixie Highway in Coconut Grove.

"Congratulations," Aurora said. "I didn't know baseball was a contact sport."

She sat next to me drawing up her legs, hunching over them, showing her white panties. She wore a low-cut blouse.

"Did you get hurt when you scored?"

I rubbed my shoulder. "It'll be okay."

She played with the grass, twisting blades around her fingers. Blue jays bathed in the fountain and squirrels chased each other around and up the trunk of a coconut palm. Pink skin below the tan line on her cleavage was exposed. From a thin silver chain, a Star of David hung around her neck. I wanted to ask her about the costume she'd worn the day before. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she was. But I said, "Thanks for coming to the game."

"I did it for Hailey," she said.

"I didn't see her."

"She was sitting next to me." I squinted as I tried to remember if I'd seen her. "Want to talk about a contact sport?" Aurora said. She pulled up her skirt, splaying her legs. My embarrassment, if not my erection, must

have been evident because she gave me a funny look. "The bruises," she said, pointing to black-and-blue marks on her inner thighs. "I run the hurdles."

"Oh, I get it," I said, looking away. "A contact sport."

"Hailey runs the mile."

"She can't be very good," I said. "She's too heavy."

"She won this week, made varsity," Aurora said.

I couldn't imagine Hailey winning a race. I couldn't imagine her running a mile. I didn't know what else to say. So I tried to read *Huck Finn*, but I couldn't concentrate. I put the book down and rolled onto my back. A flock of ducks flew across the cloudless sky in a V-shape formation. As the birds passed overhead, I was wishing that I knew how to talk to a girl, how to talk to Aurora, and I felt myself falling into a well of sadness so deep I didn't have the courage to plumb its depths.

The spell was broken when Aurora picked up the novel and said, "That's a pretty lame assignment."

"My thesis is that *Huck Finn* is so racist it's not even assigned in the colored schools," I said.

"How can a novel be racist when the hero is a black man?" she said.

"Huck Finn wasn't Negro."

"Huck's not the hero. He's just the narrator. Jim is the hero," she said.

"Huck's the hero," I said. "He helps Jim escape."

"Jim protects Huck," she said. "He's the only one who does."

"So does Judge Thatcher," I said.

"He just protected Huck's money," she said. "He didn't protect Huck from his father."

I saw her point. But I wasn't going to concede. "The introduction by T. S. Eliot doesn't even mention Jim, and Eliot won the Nobel Prize."

"Eliot was dead from the neck down, etherized upon his own table," she said.

"What? What does that mean?"

"It's a line from Eliot's poem, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' No one understands it, but they pretend to," she said. "It's nonsense, like his introduction to *Huckleberry Finn*."

"But the introduction is part of the assignment," I said.

Her hands shook. "Here," she said, handing me her copy of *Huckleberry Finn* opened to the title page. Someone had written: "The rats

are underneath the piles. / The Jew is underneath the lot. / Money in furs."

"Who would write that?" I said.

"T. S. Eliot. I copied it," she said, "from one of his poems that my mother showed me."

I said, "He wrote a poem comparing Jews to rats?"

"Yes," she said, "before the holocaust. After the war he gets the Nobel Prize."

I tried to imagine what she was thinking, what she was feeling.

"When she teaches advanced English lit, my mother uses Eliot's poems to question the social value of literary prizes."

"What does your father do?" I said.

"He's a naval aviator."

"Bruce wants to go to the Naval Academy. Would your dad talk to us?"

"My dad—his plane was shot down over Hanoi." Her eyes were moist. "He'll come home when the war's over."

I felt even worse.

She brushed a lock of hair off my forehead. "How come you've never spoken to me?" She traced her index finger across my cheek. "I'd kiss you," she said, "but you need a shave."

"Why do you hang out with Roger?" I said. "Those kids smoke pot."

I knew if I asked that question I might put her off, but as much as I wanted her to kiss me, I didn't want to get mixed up with the wrong kind of girl.

"You know," she said, "when I said that, about kissing you, I meant it platonically." She took my hand, her fingers entwining mine.

"It felt romantic," I said.

"Your lips aren't scratchy. I meant a kiss on the cheek."

She laughed, scrambled to her feet. I jumped up, laughing, ready for a chase. But Bruce, an eclipse of gloom, dragging his letterman's jacket on the ground behind him as if he were bringing us the head of John the Baptist, was walking toward us.

He headed directly toward Aurora and, getting in her face, said with spittle flying from his mouth, "Dad's taking Hailey home. She's grounded. You better not see her again."

Aurora stepped away, lifted her purse from the lawn.

"Go ahead, run. You cowered, Peacenik!" He raised a fist, his face a display of menace.

A mechanical susurrus, a flash of sunlight on metal. Aurora almost crouching, held a switchblade.

“Jesus!” Bruce said, audibly exhaling, brows furrowing in a frown, his Adam’s apple rising and falling.

I stepped between them. “Aurora! Bruce?” I said, pushing him back. “Aurora, put that away.”

“You saw him attack me, Georges. It’s self-defense,” she said.

“Bruce wouldn’t hit a girl,” I said. Aurora folded the knife but still held it. “Bruce, what’s going on?”

“That tramp was going to take Hailey to an anti-war rally. Dad found out.”

“No one is taking anyone. We’re going together,” she said. “Free speech is a constitutional liberty our soldiers are fighting and dying for.” Turning to Bruce she added, “But I doubt you or your father have heard of the First Amendment.”

Bruce said, “Hailey’s not going anywhere with you.”

“In that case,” Aurora said, her tone softening, her knife now nowhere to be seen, “we won’t need these.” She took an envelope out of her purse and handed it to me before walking away.

I opened the envelope.

“What is it?” Bruce said.

“Two tickets to the Battle of the Bands tonight at Dinner Key Auditorium.”

Driving to the concert, Bruce had a tight grip on the steering wheel. “Hailey called Dad a fascist and left the house against orders. She’s AWOL.”

“What’s wrong with her?” I said.

“What’s not wrong with her?” he said.

“Aurora’s father was a navy pilot. Now he’s a POW,” I said.

“That cunt pulled a knife on me.”

I blanched. It was the first time I’d heard that word.

He made a wry face. “And she dishonors her father’s sacrifice. The hippies want freedom, but they won’t defend it.”

The day before, I would have agreed emphatically. Now I said nothing.

At our seats, in the second row, we were greeted with a bear hug by Ray Bindle, tall, bearded, wearing a denim jacket with a yellow peace symbol.

He'd been our best pitcher. He'd been a mentor, a role model. Now he played college ball.

The auditorium lights dimmed, strobe lights flashed, over a PA a voice boomed, "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN . . ."

Ray lit a joint, offered it to Bruce, who pushed it away.

". . . WFUN PRESENTS THE MIAMI ROCKFEST."

Suddenly – and this was another shock – Aurora, wearing the red top with silver comets, waving drumsticks, bounded onto the stage followed by Melody and Phoebe – two of the hottest girls at our school – wearing similar costumes.

Melody picked up an electric guitar. Phoebe stood behind a keyboard, Aurora hit the bass drum and rolled her sticks on the snare, then Phoebe and Melody joined in a rock 'n' roll riff.

A spotlight illuminated a burst of smoke, and a girl with a perky figure and a glittering silver comet streaking across her tight-fitting spandex top stepped sprightly through the vapors, dancing suggestively, provocatively, singing with conviction, "For civil rights/we set our sights/with rock 'n' roll/we lift our souls."

Cabernet hair fell in ringlets over her bare shoulders. "A new dawn's come/To bring the day/The war will end/What do you say?"

Her band mates chanted, "Make love—"

The audience roared, "Not war!"

"Who's that girl?" I said.

"That's not a girl," Bruce said, "that's my sister."

A banner unfurled from the rafters. It said: THE COMETS.

"C'mon," Bruce said, "let's go."

I didn't move.

Leaving, he said, "Be sure you get a ride home with someone who isn't stoned."

Hailey waved to the crowd, blew kisses to Ray and his friends.

"This next song," she said, "written by our celestial goddess, Aurora, is dedicated to the man with the secret plan to end the war." She struck a Richard Nixon pose, waving peace signs above her head, then she picked up an electric guitar.

Aurora sang the words, the title to her song, "The Napalm Rag."

Melody and Hailey turned toward each other like hockey players in a face-off. Their guitars twanged in a discordant clash that gave way to a

melodic groove with a classic backbeat. The Comets sang about jungles vaporized, villages pillaged, children mutilated, and American sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers slaughtered prolifically, needlessly, regrettably in combat.

When the Comets came upstage to bow, a skinny guy handed Hailey a bouquet of roses. She tossed them, one by one, into the audience.

During intermission, Aurora, Phoebe and Melody, wearing jeans and tank tops, claimed the seats in front of us. Aurora climbed into our row, hugged me. Then she put her arms around Ray and they kissed. He caressed one of her breasts. She laughed, pushed his hand away.

My disappointment must have been evident.

“Sit with Phoebe,” Aurora said.

Phoebe gave me an ugly look. “Roger told me you sucker-punched him.”

When Hailey arrived, she and the skinny guy embraced.

I said, “Who is he?”

Ray said, “That’s Angel. A frat brother. He’s okay.”

“Swell,” I said. “How old is he?”

Ray said, “He’s twenty-two.”

Angel’s arm was around Hailey’s waist; she was leaning into him.

“But Hailey’s sixteen,” I said.

Aurora said, “Everyone knows Hailey has a father complex.”

The lights dimmed. “JUST BACK FROM THEIR TOUR OF NEW ENGLAND, PLEASE WELCOME— GATHERS NO MOSS.”

A spotlight fell on a Keith Richards look-alike bent over his guitar. With a pick, he twanged a string causing a note to reverberate like machine-gun fire. The snares rolled, and a Mick Jagger look-alike pranced onto the stage, waving his arms above his head, swaying his skinny hips and torso, singing, “Gold Coast slave ship bound for cotton fields.”

Angel and Hailey bopped and rocked. Aurora and Ray kissed, grinding their hips. I tapped Phoebe on the shoulder, asking by gesture to trade seats. She looked at me disdainfully but climbed into my row and I climbed into hers.

Dancing, Melody grabbed my hand, but I just stood there, feeling like an idiot. Aurora offered me a joint. Ray had his hand in the waistband of her jeans. I took a cautious drag but coughed out the smoke.

Melody inhaled like a pro. Then, pressing her breasts against me, she covered my mouth with hers and exhaled. Shaking her head to the music, she tickled my face with her feathery hair.

After another mouth-to-mouth exchange of smoke, she shouted, “How do you feel?”

“Happy,” I said, stifling a titter.

Mick Jagger’s look-alike sang the final lyrics of “Brown Sugar,” dancing and waving. “Hello, Miami,” he said in a hilarious imitation of a British accent. I lost it, laughing.

Melody, pointing at me, laughed too. That made me laugh harder. Ray, Aurora, and Phoebe laughed. Then the Mick Jagger look-alike laughed, and I stopped laughing.

“What’s funny?” I said.

“That’s what we’re wondering,” Aurora said. I cracked up again.

When the lights went up, I didn’t remember where I was. I looked for Hailey, but she was gone.

“I’ll take you home,” Ray said.

In the parking lot, Melody, Phoebe, Aurora and I got into Ray’s VW Day-Glo-painted minibus. He drove us to the airport, parked on a side street.

In a field of wildflowers, we lay side by side and smoked another joint. Airplanes roared so close overhead I could read the instructions to the mechanics stenciled on the undercarriages of the fuselages.

Ray rolled on top of Aurora, his hips glued to hers, her mouth glued to his. Melody and Phoebe were talking about something they must have thought was amusing.

I stood up, intending to leave, but someone pressed her breasts against my back and put her arms around me.

I turned around. It was Hailey.

She kissed me, rubbed her nose on my earlobe. “Close your eyes,” she said.

When I did, she slid her tongue into my mouth.

I said, “What are you doing?”

“Making out with you,” she said.

A rush of heavy air – a jet, descending as if floating, its thunderous roar creating a silence of its own – crushed her against me. When its wheels screeched on the runway, I said, “Where’s Angel?”

“I fired him.” She slipped one hand under my T-shirt, running her fingers over my chest. Her other hand fingered my belt. She tried to kiss me again.

“We can’t,” I said. “You’re Bruce’s sister.”

“Not anymore,” she said. “When I was Bruce’s sister, you never noticed me.”

She pulled me to the ground, lay beside me, opened her mouth, kissed me and rhythmically moved against me. My erection rubbed against her and she pulled me even closer. “Don’t stop,” she said. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted this?”

“How long?”

“Forever,” she said.

We embraced beneath a sky of sparkling diamonds, crowded with planes clustered like galaxies in a constellation. Shockwaves of wind and sound, like currents of electricity, ran between us.

I said, “Forever?”

“Forever,” she said, holding me close, then saying between kisses again and again, “Forever. Forever. Forever.”

Aphelion

Phoebe toyed with her fork, sculpting her uneaten salad into a moonscape. If she'd been her usual self, she would have been *kvetching* about recidivism or soapboxing for transgender equality or going on and on and on about one of her daughters or the other – the Itzhak Perlman or the Albert Einstein. I chattered about global warming and the revolting political climate, trying to draw her out, but nothing was working.

Lunchtime we often met under the canopy of a banyan tree near the tennis courts where we frequently played in Douglas Park, about a half mile from Coral Gables Hospital, where she was the CFO, and just under a mile from Gables High, where I taught twelfth-grade English. But the wet heat of the South Florida day had driven us indoors. We were sitting in a booth at Highway 61, a “make love, not war” tribute luncheonette. That’s what I called the place because of its décor and the playlist on the jukebox. The posters on the walls had a ’60’s theme that made the current events of those times seem as if they were today’s news: Soviet tanks in Prague, Joan Baez at Woodstock, the Chicago Seven on trial, Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial, and Vietnamese civilians hanging on to a helicopter lifting off the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. My father had said of this image that it captured our national shame, the United States lacking the backbone to stanch the spread of communism.

The jukebox had twice played “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” and was playing it again. Somebody, in bad taste or as a bad joke, had queued the song to play repeatedly.

I glanced at my watch. Fifth period began in twenty-two minutes. If I walked briskly, I’d make it to my classroom in fifteen. It was time to cut to the mustard. I freshened my lipstick and said, “Shall we go?”

Our server poured steaming coffee into our partially filled cups as Phoebe pushed her salad aside and said, “I told Manny to move out.”

My cell phone rang, but I ignored it.

I said, “I’ve been trying to get Al to move out for twenty years, what with the wet towels on the bathroom floor, clipping his toenails in bed. The man thinks peeing is like horseshoes?”

She scrunched her nose. “Hailey, that’s gross—.”

“And remembering to put down the toilet seat? Forget it. Lately, I’ve been hinting he should go to Schenectady—”

“Hailey!” she said, “stop. I’m not joking.”

Phoebe and Manny? No way. They were an institution, a monument to marriage.

She was one of my two best girlfriends. We’d known each other since elementary school. Why hadn’t I seen this coming? I reached across the table, took her hand, felt heat rising beneath my collar, up my neck. “Who’s he *schtupping*?”

“God, I hope it’s someone,” she said, “because if he is, she sure ain’t me.” She put her eyeglasses on the table, dabbed her eyes with a tissue. “He looks at TV the way he used to look at me, and he looks at me as if I were the furniture.” She sipped her coffee. “That’s when he bothers to look at me, when he isn’t looking at his smartphone.”

“Typical husband behavior,” I said. “Have you suggested counseling?”

“Why are you leaving Al?”

“I said Schenectady, not Siberia.”

“A woman doesn’t joke about such a thing.”

“So now you’re Anna Freud? Let me tell you, Al’s as good as they come. Why not spice up the conjugal bed?” I said.

She held her coffee cup in both hands, turning it as if molding clay on a potter’s wheel. “It’s over between me and Manny.” She looked away, drumming her fingers on the table, keeping time with Dylan’s song. “I’m seeing someone,” she said. “We’re in love.”

Cold coffee washed over my tongue in bitter waves.

She leaned her head against the back of the booth and closed her eyes. “It’s Roger Knox.”

A name I hadn’t heard in a lifetime.

Outside the air-conditioned comfort of Highway 61, the air was inordinately humid, the sky a gradation of blues streaked with pink and orange clouds, white oleander in bloom, coconut palm fronds hanging limp in the absence of a breeze.

When we hugged goodbye, I was thinking about Al. He was Gibraltar: a board member of our synagogue, a bank president, a man who brought home a handsome paycheck, a handsome husband who came home sober. A husband who would never cheat— on his wife, on his taxes, in business.

He was a decorated military hero. A better father for my boy I couldn't ask for.

As I hurried up the street, wishing I'd worn running shoes, thinking I could make it on time, my cell phone rang again. I grabbed it without breaking stride. The caller ID said: MA. I threw it back in my purse and quickened my pace. It rang again. I was breathing deeply; my blouse clung to my chest and back, but the exercise felt good. I was almost jogging when I answered the phone. "Ma, I'm late. I'll call you."

She was crying.

"Ma?" I came to a standstill at a crosswalk across the street from the school. "Ma?" I said again. A crush of students rushed passed me. "Melvin—" was all she could say.

"He's in his classroom," I said. "I saw him when I left for lunch. Call him."

Her voice was soft. "He's— dead. My Melvin. He's dead."

I'd been worrying about Ma. She was becoming more and more forgetful, sometimes disoriented, momentarily not knowing where she was. I'd urged Dad not to let her drive, to take her to her doctor for testing: for dementia, for Alzheimer's, to find out what was going on. But Dad was in denial, assuring me that nothing was amiss, that Mom was herself, everything was fine. Bruce had promised that he'd be home soon to help me with the situation.

"No Ma, he's not," I said. "I'll see him in a few minutes and tell him to call you."

"He came home twenty minutes ago." She was struggling for words. "He's on the sofa. He's dead. Call Bruce. Come home. Hailey, please come home."

"I'm coming," I said. "I'll bring Dad with me."

Now I was running. But I managed to call Dad on the way. There was no answer.

The bell rang just moments after I reached my classroom. I gave my students a ten-minute writing assignment and told them I was going to my father's classroom and would be back in five minutes.

In Dad's classroom, his students were restless, fidgeting in their seats. I called Dad's cell again.

Ma answered. "Hailey, should I call the police or wait for you?"

I called the principal's office, then walked slowly to my car. Every breath was distinct. The flora I'd loved since childhood – hibiscus, palmettos – seemed to be returning that love. I visualized the faces of the passengers in the jets soaring overhead. A man about my father's age was teaching a boy to ride a bike. My hands shook. I wanted to call Dad yet again, to break through, finally to reach him, tell him about this outrageous mistake, share a laugh. But it was Bruce whom I called.

I couldn't reach him on his cell, so I called him at the air base in Pensacola where he was stationed. I had to move up a chain of command, but it wasn't long before I reached a senior officer who said he reported directly to Bruce and could deliver a message. I heard my voice, strained and formal, as if someone else were talking.

"Thank you, Captain Adler. It's Hailey Rosen, Admiral Levine's sister. Our father— our father has— Can you reach Admiral Levine for me, please?"

Moments later, Bruce was on the line. "Hailey?" he said. "Hailey? What happened? Is Dad okay?"

More than a hundred people gathered at the cemetery. Tears and mascara congealed beneath Ma's eyes. She held the flag – folded like a napkin in a neat triangle – that moments before had draped the coffin.

Phoebe stood between Manny and Aurora. Manny touched Phoebe's arm. She brushed his hand aside. Her rigid bearing reminded me of the way Dad stood when he was angry.

I thought of the year he wouldn't speak to me, the year I'd lived in California with Georges, and I whispered in Ma's ear, "Did anyone tell Georges about Dad?"

"Georges who?" she said.

Georges who? I thought, asking myself the same question. Georges Who? As if that were his name: Georges Who.

She put her arm through mine. "Georges Bohem?" she said. "Is that who?"

After high school, Georges was going to UCLA, and I was going to Gainesville. One night, about a week before he was to leave, we were making out and then I pushed him away.

"We might as well break up now," I said. "I'm moving back to Coral Gables after college and you'll probably fall in love with California."

He kissed my neck, brushed his fingers over the front of my blouse and whispered, “Perihelion,” as if the word would seduce me. But it had the opposite effect.

“Coral Gables is my perihelion,” he said, “and you’re my sun.”

“Peri what?”

“Perihelion. The point in the orbit of a comet or a planet—”

I caught his hand on my thigh. “The point what?”

“The point when it’s nearest the sun,” he said. “Los Angeles is my aphelion.”

I tried suppressing the memory. It was disrespectful thinking of Georges at Dad’s funeral.

Al and I would never have had that conversation because Al never met a metaphor he understood. What I didn’t want and didn’t get with Al was subtext. Dad and Georges had provided me with enough complexity to last a lifetime. Georges could have put everything in perspective, but I hadn’t heard from him in decades.

“It would have made your father happy if Georges were here,” Ma said. She must have seen confusion on my grieving face. “Sometimes,” she said, “we become the angriest with those we love the most.”

Had Dad changed his mind about Georges? Al took my arm, and following my mother, Bruce and his family, and followed by our son we led a line of mourners, who tossed earth on the coffin, saying good-bye to my father.

After the funeral I felt more crowded in my parents’ home than I had in Times Square on New Year’s Eve. In *The Great Gatsby*, Jordan Baker confides to Nick Carraway, “I like large parties. They’re so intimate. At small parties, there isn’t any privacy.”

I felt no intimacy. The press of bodies, the clamor of conversation, the onslaught of friends and strangers deprived me of what I needed most.

Al and I huddled.

“Jacob’s suffering texting withdrawal,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “He spends too much time in hyperspace.”

“Cyberspace,” I said. “He’s got homework.”

“It’s Sunday afternoon.”

“Al, I need space.”

Crossing the threshold of Dad's study was like traversing a time warp. Tchotchkes and memorabilia were neatly arranged. The high school-baseball décor – mounted bats and balls, newspaper clippings and photos of his teams – hadn't changed. But there were more bookshelves. The library was still devoted primarily to science and sports. And although Dad had said there was no way to compare the experience of combat with reading about it, he'd read a wide array of books about war. So I wasn't surprised to see several shelves marked "Vietnam." I was surprised to see books authored by Ellsberg, McNamara, Kovic, and Kerry: cold warriors who'd later opposed the war. I took several volumes off the shelves and thumbed through them. "Damn it," I said, remembering the times he'd grounded me for protesting.

A framed photograph of one of his championship teams hung on the wall above his desk. In the front row the smaller boys crouched on their right knees in a semicircle. The coaches and taller players stood behind them where Dad stood with an arm around Bruce, the other around Georges.

I didn't hear Phoebe and Aurora when they came in.

"Old stuff coming up today," Aurora said, slipping an arm around my waist and staring at the photo with me. "Al said you and your mom talked about Georges at the cemetery."

"It was nothing," I said, sinking into Dad's desk chair.

Phoebe had a bottle of wine and three glasses. She poured a glass for each of us. Then she said, "Why were you thinking about Georges?"

I didn't answer her right away, just sipped the wine. Then we each had another glass, polishing off the bottle. When I swirled the few remaining drops of wine over dregs of sediment, I said, "In the cemetery, I remembered a promise I'd made to Georges."

"What promise?" Aurora said.

"It doesn't matter anymore."

Phoebe browsed through the books on the shelves, Aurora picked up McNamara's memoir, and I read Dad's copious marginalia in *The Pentagon Papers*. As if in a dream, I said, "There's something I never told you. When I was a junior in college, I had a fight with Dad." I shut my eyes, the memory washing over the levee that had kept it at bay.

I'd been asleep at dawn on a Sunday morning when the doorbell rang, though at first I didn't recognize the sound. I pulled a pillow over my head,

hoping it would stop. It didn't. So I got out of bed and slipped into a pair of sweats, intending to give the schmuck ringing the bell a swift kick in his privates.

When I opened the door, Dad was standing on the porch, looking bedraggled. His eyes were swollen. He must have driven all night. I grabbed his hand and pulled him in.

"Dad? What's wrong?"

The folds of skin on either side of his eyes crinkled. He was holding an olive-green rucksack, one he'd had for as long as I could remember. Printed on the front beneath the logo of the Marine Corps were the words, SEMPER FIDELES. His gun-metal gray hair was cut in a flattop to regulation one-quarter-inch length, his bearing was military, his grimace menacing. He plopped down on the sofa, pulled my high school diary out of his rucksack, and smacked it on the coffee table.

"What's wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong," he said. "I'm sick, thinking of those soldiers, boys your age— patriots—"

His anger tossed me into memories of antiwar protests turned violent: police in riot gear swinging clubs, breaking bones, spilling blood. Feeling as if I were choking on tear gas, I walked to the window, intending to open it, but my path was blocked by dust particles reflecting sunlight, swirling in a vortex, and I burst into laughter. "Don't tell me— don't tell me you came all the way up here to pick a fight about the war." When I caught my breath, he was still sitting on the sofa, staring at me. I went into the kitchen.

"I'm making coffee," I called out. "You want some?"

When I returned to the living room, I said, "Tell me you didn't read my diary." But of course, he had. I could see it in his face. He'd figured it out, put it all together: protesting the war, smoking pot, making love, and rock 'n' roll were all symptoms of the same plague. And I was a carrier of the disease.

Instead of answering me, he put on his reading glasses. Then he opened my diary and began marking it with a highlighter. It wasn't until then that the full impact of what he'd done hit me. He'd read about me and Georges making love. He'd read about sexual fantasies I'd never told another person. I thought about grabbing the diary; I thought about strangling him with my bare hands. And I thought about telling him he was a pervert. Instead, I said between shallow breaths, "We were trying to save lives."

He put his highlighter down. "Tell that to the boys left maimed," he said, peering over the tops of his readers. "Tell it to the parents of the boys who are dead. Tell it to their wives and children. Make love, not war! What bullshit!" Then he returned to his work, stabbing a page of my diary with his highlighter.

"You can talk to my friend Abdul-Bari," I said, getting into it. He was on my turf now, or so I thought. "You can debate the war with someone who's been there. You tell him what his sacrifice was for."

"Abdul-Bari? The boy who lost his legs when he stepped on a landmine on the outskirts of Da Nang? You call him," he said, while continuing to mark up my diary with his highlighter. "I want him to know how *you* mocked his sacrifice. How you abandoned decency."

"There is nothing indecent protesting a senseless war," I said.

"Honor!" he said. "It's about honor. Honor begins with honesty. When I said you could play in that rock and roll band, you promised me you would never use drugs."

"Is this about the war or is it about smoking pot?"

He was quiet, and I thought he was considering the question until, without warning, he shouted, "It's about betrayal. It's about Georges."

I sat on the other side of the sofa, looking at the floor. He was quiet, breathing hard, not saying a word. He finished his coffee and asked for another cup.

I couldn't move. Apparently, the weight of the moment had the same effect on Dad because he, too, was motionless. We sat there, still, not talking, for only a few minutes, but I felt the passage of a generation.

Dad capped the highlighter, put it in his shirt pocket, and closed my diary. "Well," he said, "are you getting coffee?"

When I returned from the kitchen he was pacing.

"I trusted that boy, and he gave you dope and used you," he said, waving my diary like an evangelical preacher threatening the mortal souls of his congregants with the Good Book. Then his voice cracked. "Well, I'm telling you now, if you marry that rodent, you'll never have my blessing. I won't be there."

I grabbed the diary and waved it in his face. "You read my diary! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"For what? For loving you? For protecting you from a drug-addled pervert?"

“For possession of stolen property! For violating my privacy! For never really understanding me!” I threw my diary on the sofa. “Take your pick!”

“All right,” he said, “I’ll turn myself in. And when I do I’ll give the evidence to the police.” He picked up the diary, holding it like an indictment. “Evidence of statutory rape, possession of narcotics, and treason. Let the police read the passages I’ve highlighted and decide who should go to jail.” Then he sat on the sofa and looked away from me, rubbing his temples.

“You make great coffee,” he said, “like your mother.”

“Let me make you breakfast.”

“No. I’m driving back to Coral Gables.”

“No, you’re not. You need sleep. I’ll go out and get breakfast. When you wake up, we’ll eat. We can talk rationally. Then you can drive home.”

He said okay. When I got back, my diary was on the coffee table and Dad was gone.

It was dark outside when I finished telling Phoebe and Aurora the story.

“I can’t imagine how you and your dad got beyond that,” Aurora said.

“I told Georges that Dad needed time to cool off. But even a year later, when I mentioned Georges’s name Dad would say, ‘Who? The Pinko Penis?’”

“Ouch,” Phoebe said.

“Mom said she was Switzerland. Bruce never spoke to Georges again.”

My eyes were drawn to one of Dad’s meticulous notes in *The Pentagon Papers*. He’d written: CAPT. G. ALLEN – K.I.A. 4/25/75. The date struck me. It was four days before the fall of Saigon. Memories of our fights about the war flashed through my mind like a medley of nightmares. Then I began drowning in other memories: the passion Georges and I had shared the year we’d lived in Berkeley, his first year of law school, and the pain of breaking up when the alienation from my family became too much for me to bear.

I remained in Dad’s study long after Phoebe and Aurora left, reminiscing, unable to forget the promise I’d made to Georges.

Three years after I broke up with Georges, our high school class held its ten-year reunion in the Galaxy Ballroom of the Fontainebleau Hotel. The

band played fifties, sixties, and seventies rock 'n' roll, the hors d'oeuvres were scrumptious, and almost everyone was present or accounted for.

I sat at a table toward the rear of the ballroom with Aurora and Phoebe, watching my classmates from a distance. Cliques reunited, orbiting each other. The lost and the found, the popular and the outcast, the jocks and the nerds, the druggies and the straights – unshackled from high school's hierarchical conventions – roamed the floor like rogue asteroids.

Aurora nodded toward the ballroom entrance where Roger Knox was slinking in like a wounded dog, barefoot, wearing a scraggly beard and a bead necklace over the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk. “Talk about losers!” she said.

“Is he homeless?” I said.

Roger joined Ryan Hunter at the punchbowl. Roger had been an ardent pothead. Ryan, who wore a stylish suit, had been a preppy. They'd played together on the football team. Ryan removed a flask from his jacket pocket and poured a healthy amount of gold-colored liquid into each of their cups. Roger gestured toward a rogue asteroid passing by and they shared a laugh.

“Seeing those two together is a visual oxymoron,” I said.

Aurora said to Phoebe, “What a difference ten years makes. It's hard for me to imagine that Roger is the boy who broke your heart.”

“If I wasn't over him before, I sure am now,” she said.

“He was a hunk,” Aurora said. “Now he makes Manny look slim.”

“Watch it,” Phoebe said, poking Aurora with a rolled-up program. “Manny looks great. I couldn't be happier.” Then she added, either with genuine curiosity or to divert the conversation from her breakup with Roger, “Do you think Georges will show?”

“Georges who?” I said.

“Gorgeous Georges,” Aurora said. “That's who.”

“Oh, that Georges.” I waved my hand dismissively.

Aurora laid a crumpled bill on the table. “Ten bucks says he'll show.”

I slapped a five and five ones on the table.

Aurora raised a glass. “All right! To Georges Who!”

“To Georges, the no-show, that's who,” I said.

Aurora downed her drink.

“Aurora, easy,” Phoebe said. “I thought you wanted to dance 'til dawn.”

“'Course I do,” she said, “but we gotta lubricate our locomotion.”

“It's your elocution that's lubricated,” I said.

She turned her head in the direction of Phoebe's gaze, then took her ten, my five, and my five ones, folded them neatly, and slipped them into her purse.

Past crepe streamers hanging from the ceiling, past dazzling gowns and tuxedos rocking under spotlights on the dance floor, past familiar but older faces, past faces flirting, faces laughing, past the memorial for four classmates who'd passed away, past a slide show of senior-yearbook photos, past moms and dads I'd known as teens now living paycheck-to-paycheck, past nostalgia, and through a tunnel of time, I saw what Aurora saw: the face of Georges Bohem. He was at the bar talking to Roger and Ryan.

I said, "I hope he doesn't see us." Their old pals surrounded them and swept them toward their tables.

Aurora leapt from her chair. "C'mon. It's 'The Wah Watusi.' Les' dance."

And so we did, spinning and whirling, bumping and grinding, bopping to the beat, retracing the steps of dance fads of the past: The Watusi, The Jerk, The Fly, The Shake.

As we stumbled off the dance floor, I looked around the room. Georges was nowhere in sight. "Do you think Georges is out by the pool, smoking a joint?" I said.

"Who? Georges?" I trembled, hearing his maple-sugar voice. "He wasn't in that degenerate crowd of yours, was he?"

"Georges!" Aurora said. In a heartbeat, she was covering his face with kisses.

"Aurora," he said. "Take it easy."

Phoebe took Aurora by the arm, and they vanished in a throng of celebration.

When we sat down, our knees touched. I dipped a napkin in a glass of water and wiped Aurora's lipstick off his face. He was wearing a tropical linen suit, like the ones Humphrey Bogart wore in *Casablanca*, and Mickey Mouse cuff links I'd given him in high school. His hair was short – a look I hadn't seen on him since he'd first left for UCLA. He could have just stepped off the cover of *GQ*.

"You've kept in shape," I said.

"Want to meet in the morning for a run?"

"I don't know," I said.

“You seeing someone?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You?”

“No,” he said. “Is it serious?”

“I don’t know.”

He cupped his hand behind my neck, massaging it, drawing my face toward his. When his breath was on my lips I whispered, “He’s Jewish, but Dad says I’ll never be happy with him.”

He brushed his lips over mine and said softly, “Why not?”

“Insufficient gravitas.”

I put my arms around him, feeling safe. And then there it was, Georges’s sadness, a sadness at the core of his being. In all the time I’d known him, I’d never discovered its source. It was why I loved him – not because of his brilliance, not because of his integrity, not because of his strength or his beauty, but because of that ineffable sadness.

“How’s your dad?” he said. “I’d like to talk to him.”

The band was playing “Dark Hollow,” a Grateful Dead song. Tethered balloons floated above the buffet tables, the stage, and the bars at opposite ends of the ballroom.

“Nothing’s changed,” I said. “It wasn’t about Dad. It was you. You sold out.”

“Me? You used to say your dad was a sellout. Now you’ve got the same establishment job he has, teaching at the same high school.”

“Public schoolteachers,” I said. “Who do you help?” I ran my fingers over his lapels. “Look at this suit. You’re not practicing poverty law. And that bi-coastal thing. You’re my perihelion, so Coral Gables is my sun.”

“Coral Gables is my perihelion; you’re my sun.” He caught my hand in his. “I’ll move to Coral Gables now. I passed the Florida bar exam. I’ll quit my job in L. A. and practice poverty law here if that’s what you want.”

“Dad will never—”

“He can. He can accept our love.”

I tried to imagine Dad changing his mind about Georges, recalling the outbursts, the threats, the recriminations. I untied a white balloon from the back of the chair next to me, holding it by its ribbon. Then Georges slipped his hand into mine and the balloon drifted up to the ceiling.

“No,” I said. “I can’t. I just can’t.”

Georges pulled me to my feet and sang with the band, “Dance all night/Play all day/Don’t let nothing get in the way,” rocking back on his

heels, then twisting. He lifted my hand over my head, and I turned under it. He raised my hand again, I turned in the other direction, then spun toward him. When our bodies met he draped his arms around me, and we floated as one just above the music. When the song ended, we kissed.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, you can.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes. Yes. If Molly Bloom could say yes, then I can.”

“Yes,” we whispered in unison.

Then, suddenly, we weren’t alone.

“Hey, Georges.” It was Manny, walking briskly toward us.

Georges raised his hand like a running back about to stiff-arm a safety. “Bad timing, Manny.”

Manny stopped, looking befuddled. Phoebe, Aurora, and Al were heading in our direction. Georges gave me a rueful smile.

There were bear hugs, back slaps, “How you doing, bro?” “Long time, man.” A bottle of champagne appeared, and we toasted the past – high school, college, the insanity of the war, an LSD trip that had taken us to the center of the universe and back.

“I hear you’re a prosecutor, like Aurora,” Al said. “The Los Angeles District Attorney.”

“I’m a federal deputy public defender, actually,” Georges said.

“Who do you defend?” Al said. “Purse snatchers? Child molesters?”

“People charged with crimes deserve due process,” Aurora said.

“Crimes that do what?” Al said.

“Last year, I was promoted to assistant chief of the Major Felonies Division. But it’s time for a change. I have an offer to practice transactional law. Hard work, a lot I’d have to learn.”

“You were smart to go to law school.” Al’s face was expressionless, his voice bland.

“Banking’s exciting,” Georges said with warmth.

“Yeah? I’m assistant branch manager,” Al said, as if his job were a death sentence. “I approve loans up to five thousand bucks. You got a sports car?”

“A Mustang convertible,” Georges said. “What are you driving?”

“You got a beach house?” Al said.

Georges laughed. “I am a government employee,” he said.

“You’ll be a rich corporate lawyer,” Al said. “You’ll have that beach house.”

“That’s not my ambition,” Georges said. “I’m also thinking about going to grad school.”

“That’s intriguing,” Aurora said. “What would you study?”

Al said, “You got a girl?”

“No,” Georges said.

Al, putting his arm around me, said, “Hailey and I are getting hitched.”

“Al,” I said, pulling away from him. “It’s not official.”

“Hey,” Aurora said. “How come you haven’t told me?”

Georges looked sadder than the day we broke up. I couldn’t speak.

Together we walked toward the ballroom entrance. He placed his hands on my hips and touched his forehead to mine.

“Promise me you’ll tell your dad I said hello.”

“I promise,” I said.

He walked to the ballroom doors, shaking a few hands along the way. Ryan Hunter joined him and they walked out of the ballroom.

A week after Dad’s funeral, Phoebe and I met at Highway 61.

“Did your mom tell you what she meant when she said your dad loved Georges?”

She should have told me a long time ago. By the time Dad had revised his views about the Vietnam War, I was already married. Dad never felt threatened by my love for Al. What’s more, the times had changed: gang warfare and race riots had replaced civil disobedience. Dad had often said he wished that kids today would become as engaged in world affairs as we had. Maybe that was his way of apologizing.

“Ma said that Dad saw a lot of himself in Georges.”

“Well,” Phoebe said, “that was obvious. So did everyone else.”

“They were as different as—” I looked at the posters on the wall “— the guardsmen and the students at Kent State, guns and wildflowers.”

“Really?” Phoebe said. “You didn’t see it?”

“Roger Knox?” I said. “Last I heard he was living in Ethiopia, posted to Addis Ababa.”

“Our paths crossed from time to time over the years . . .” she said, but I lost the drift of what she was saying, thinking instead about Dad and Georges, both now gone, wondering what Dad’s reaction would have been had I kept my promise to Georges. I swirled the remaining drops of coffee

around the bottom of the cup, watching the mud-colored liquid wash over the grounds.

Father's Day

The Running Shoe

Smog gave the air in the Los Angeles basin the look and feel of a crusty-brown haze over a warscape after a night of firebombing. Vehicles snarled; road rage was palpable. I was caught in gridlock eastbound in my Jeep on the Santa Monica Freeway, late to court. The traffic alert advised prayer.

I was worried about my client, an octogenarian, who'd never had a cell phone. I notified the judge's clerk, telling him I'd been unexpectedly detained and would be a little late. There wasn't anything else I could do.

I wasn't one of those maniacs who lean on their horns, give the finger to other commuters for imagined offenses, or curse. And I wasn't worried about the time. After all, the case wasn't a train that could leave the station without me. I was calm but anxious about the crick in my neck. Five days running and it wasn't any better. Neither was the cough nor the nausea that also began on the morning of the first day of the trial.

The night before the trial began I'd had a haunting dream. In the nightmare, I'm on the witness stand and under cross examination I'm asked, "Mr. Bohem, why shouldn't your wife be granted a divorce?"

I want to say, that lowlife wife of mine deserted us. Why should she get a divorce? But I'm distracted by my wife's lawyer's grease-thin mustache. The ends split into unctuous tentacles, fractals that grow and slither over the counsel table. I'm unable to speak as the swirling geometric forks of slimy facial hair slide up into the witness stand, climb my legs and torso, then circle my neck, tightening like a noose.

My hands rise, trying in vain to pull off the oleaginous scaly skin of the tentacles constricting my throat. I hear cackles and hoots.

"Give the lady a medal," says the fat bailiff, his abundant belly hanging over his belt like a sack of flour.

The judge's tongue darts over her lips like a snake's. She stares lustily at Bea, whose boobs flow over the top of her low-cut blouse. Returning the

judge's flirtation, Bea's eyes dance, but she looks at me as if I'm toast.

And my own eight-hundred-dollar-an-hour lawyer? What is he doing? Is he slamming his fist on the table, objecting to this sham proceeding, stopping this sideshow free-for-all? No. He's polishing his nails, then blowing on them. He's smoothing out the lapels of his Black Label Armani suit. Then he's looking up at me as an afterthought, the corners of his mouth curling into an I-told-you-so smirk.

I manage to swallow, trying to lubricate my windpipe. Croaking, I say, "She has no grounds."

"Georges, Georges, Georges," Bea says, clucking as if we've been over this a hundred if not a thousand times.

"We rest," says her lawyer. "He's clueless."

Clueless? What is it I don't get? If I weren't suffocating, I'd denounce the proceedings as unjust, a fraud, an affront to decency, but the judge, waving a pistol, cuts off my sputtering attempts to speak.

"That's enough from you, Mr. Bohem." She stands, an imperious Kafkaesque sorceress in her flowing black robes, points the gun at my heart, as if performing a ritual, and pulls back the hammer until it cocks.

Then the gravelly voice of an adolescent boy says, "I'll do it." It's our fifteen-year-old, Dante. He takes the gun from the judge, turns it on Bea, and pulls the trigger.

Traffic on the freeway was still at a standstill. I adjusted the rearview mirror, shocked by the sight of my aged face: lines etching my forehead like blistering paint; hairline receding like the ebb of a tide; swollen, deep-maroon bags under my lower eyelids.

In the courthouse restroom, I tried to tie my too-wide tie, a Father's Day gift in happier times from Bea and Dante. The background was bright turquoise with patterns of ivory-colored dice showing sevens and elevens in brown dots. Bea had said it was for luck. But when I adjusted the knot, all I could think about was waking from the nightmare with a jolt. I reached over to wake up Bea. It was instinct. During seventeen years of marriage she'd always said, "Never say the word 'divorce.' If you don't say it, it can't happen." She'd never said it. But she wasn't there. She'd moved out three months before, and I was still startled every time I reached over and found her side of the bed empty.

I couldn't fall back to sleep, so I'd gotten up and peeked into Dante's room. His angelic face awash in the blue light of his monitor, rap thumped through his speakers. I stepped into his room to turn off his computer. When I moved the mouse an unsent e-mail to Bea appeared in place of the screensaver. It said: DEAR MOM PLEASE RETURN MY CALLS ITS BEEN THREE DAYS LOVE DANTE.

I had to focus on where I was, what I was doing. I'd run out of time to think about how to save my marriage or console my son. And even if I had time to think about the nightmare, which I didn't, it didn't take Sigmund Freud to interpret it. I was a seasoned transactional lawyer, a senior partner in a corporate law firm with a global practice, offices in fifteen cities on six continents.

From time to time I took a case or a matter pro bono and this case was one of them. Fresh out of law school, I'd tried scores of criminal cases, and I handled white-collar criminal cases brought against established clients of the firm. But this was my first civil trial, which explained the dream. It was just a little stage fright rousing me from sleep, making everything taste like sawdust, making me put my hands in my pockets when they shook. This trial was like everything else; I had it under control. When it was over, I'd have plenty of time to pull it all together: my marriage, my family, myself.

There wasn't anything I could do about being fifteen minutes late, but I was consoled knowing that not one hearing, not one morning or afternoon session had ever started on time because the judge was always late—late in the morning, late returning to court after lunch, late returning from breaks as she chain smoked while chatting with other lawyers or judges in chambers or returned or made phone calls. A forty-five-minute delay was the norm.

At the courthouse, in the men's room, I knotted and then reknotted my tie, my fingers fumbling, my hands perspiring, still not getting it right. I took it off and retied it.

I paused by the oak doors to the courtroom. Each one had a small window, like a porthole, covered from the inside by a cardboard sign that said: TRIAL IN PROGRESS. I summoned the caution I imagined all skilled civil-trial lawyers possess and pushed one of the massive portals open a few inches. Save for the high-pitched hum of the fluorescent lights, the place was silent as a crypt. When I slipped inside, the hinges groaned as the door

closed behind me. The jury was in the box, and the bailiff, clerk, and defense lawyers were all in their places. Everyone but the judge, who was reading, stared at me. She tapped a silver fountain pen against a crystal decanter. The sound was ominous like the faint ringing of crinkling ice presaging an avalanche, or the bells of a church announcing the departure of a funeral procession. She waited until I reached the counsel table, then filled her glass with water. On her good days, her voice sounded like squealing truck brakes. Now it had a new edge, sharper than shards of plate glass.

“Mr. Bohem. You’ve wasted public resources and the time of everyone here. What’s your excuse?”

Shirley Isley, my client – her silver hair, accented by her soft ebony skin, piled atop her head in a neat bun as if it were a halo – sat at the counsel table, trembling. She wheezed every time she inhaled, a rattle of mortality echoing in her chest. We were in trial to prove that nursing-home neglect had caused the death of her husband, Tobias, and amounted to elder abuse. I placed my hand on her shoulder to reassure her, to let her know that everything would be okay now that I was there.

The defendants’ liability in this case wasn’t in doubt. And the damages? \$200,000 at least.

The judge was angry because Shirley had refused a settlement offer of \$15,000. For five days, like Godzilla, she’d trampled on our evidence, our witnesses, Shirley, and now on me. But I wasn’t about to play Bambi, not with my credibility with the jury on the line.

“I telephoned, Your Honor, to let you know I’d been unavoidably detained,” I said, glancing at the clerk, waiting for him to speak. He didn’t take his eyes off his monitor.

The sound of the tapping pen grew louder, more insistent.

“I’m waiting, Mr. Bohem.”

“May we take this up at the break, Your Honor?”

“You’ve kept the jury waiting for a quarter-hour. They’re entitled to know why.”

“I had an accident,” I said.

She leaned forward, staring at me so intently I stepped back. “Is there a police report?”

This was it. The nadir of my legal career. I could quickly parse a complex business scam that had evaded regulatory oversight. Four months

before, I'd been in Kuala Lumpur representing a multinational banking consortium at the closing of a multibillion-dollar loan to finance construction of a pipeline. Now I couldn't even try this first-year-lawyer case without being humiliated. Was there anything I could still do?

"I cut myself shaving," I said.

I was stunned by the judge's outburst of laughter. Several jurors frowned while others snickered or laughed with her. The clerk lost interest in what he'd been typing and looked bemused. Even the defense lawyers, usually stoic as morticians, grinned.

"I must admit," the judge said, "I haven't heard that one before." The tone of her voice implied I was either an idiot or a liar. "There's not a mark on your face," she said. "You're ordered to pay sanctions of \$1,000 to the county by the end of the day." She licked her upper lip like a well-fed tabby lapping cream.

I tore off my jacket, unknotted my tie.

"What are you doing, Mr. Bohem? If you don't call your next witness, your case-in-chief is closed."

"I'm showing the cut on my neck to the court and the jury, Judge."

"Stop!" she said.

But I'd already yanked off my tie and in haste my shaking hands ripped off the top two buttons of my shirt to reveal blood-soaked gauze taped below my Adam's apple. When I turned to face the jury, I noticed blood on the inside of my shirt collar.

The judge slammed her gavel. "Court is in recess." She admonished the jurors, cautioning them not to discuss the case or form any opinions about the issues until all the evidence was presented. Then she said, "Counsel, see me in chambers."

When we entered her chambers, she was already smoking. The door hadn't fully closed when the lead defense lawyer blustered, "We move for a mistrial, Your Honor."

"Denied!" the judge said, lighting another cigarette. "Get yourself a new shirt, Mr. Bohem. I'm rescinding the sanctions order."

"Will you tell that to the jury?"

She exhaled a cloud of blue smoke. "Don't push your luck."

"You think I'm lucky?"

She regarded me with soft eyes and an expression one could easily mistake for kindness. "Your tie, Mr. Bohem—" I looked to see if I'd gotten

blood on it, too. I hadn't. "It's atrocious. Tomorrow, consult with your wife before leaving for court."

Reflexively, I twisted my wedding band.

I bought a new shirt and tie at Brooks Brothers, then went to the restaurant at the Music Center across the street from the courthouse, where I had a lunch date with Bea. The place was classic retro with framed paintings of nineteenth-century fox hunts, barristers in wigs, and sailing ships of war. Bea was already seated in a booth upholstered in red pleather. She'd been letting her hair grow and her tight blonde curls fell in velvet ringlets to her blouse collar. Her suit jacket lay in the booth beside her. She was clinking her wedding ring on the rim of a martini glass.

"It's 11:30," I said.

She signaled the server. "I'll have another, please."

I slid into the booth next to her. "Aren't you in trial?" I said.

The server brought Bea's second martini. I told her about Dante's unsent e-mail. "Will you please call him today?"

"You haven't learned a thing in therapy," she said. "Why are we bothering to talk reconciliation?"

I felt throbs in my shoulders, which for weeks had felt strained.

"What haven't I learned?" I said.

"Not to change the subject." She raised her voice. "Who put you in charge?"

"We were talking about—"

"You were talking," she said, her voice louder, her speech slurred.

The place was filling up. Two of my partners stopped by our table, making small talk. Had they heard Bea's outburst? When they left, I said, "Why are you angry?"

"I heard You went to an Al-Anon meeting."

I took her hand, expecting her to pull away. She didn't.

"I'll quit drinking after this trial," she said, pushing the fresh martini away. "I know I need help."

"I need help, too," I said. "That's why I went to the meeting."

"We're in therapy to get help. You don't have to make our problems public."

"I thought it was anonymous."

She was still holding my hand. She gave me that mischievous, mirthful smile that meant she was on a roll. “Naiveté is not a beneficial character trait for a civil trial lawyer.”

“I won’t be one for long,” I said.

“That’s good,” she said. “Wrongful death. What a waste of your talent. Most lawyers would kill for your book of business.”

“It turns out that there are trial judges who kill lawyers for sport.”

The server brought our salads. “I’ll pick up Dante after school— if that’s okay?” she said.

“It’s more than okay,” I said. “Spend the weekend with him.”

“I can’t. The plaintiffs have filed new motions and the opposition is due Monday.”

The jury returned a verdict of \$525,000 for Shirley, but the judge denied my motion for attorneys’ fees. She said the failure of the nursing-home staff to verify the dosage of Tobias’s insulin day after day for nine days, even after he went into a coma, wasn’t a pattern of elder abuse. She reduced the award to what she said was the value of the life of a seventy-year-old man: \$15,000.

Shirley had emphysema and was deteriorating rapidly. “Three months,” her doctor had told me, “six at the most.” If Shirley died before the case was over, her claim would die with her and the nursing home would pay nothing. I filed an appeal and an emergency motion for an expedited hearing, which was granted. My opening brief was due in one week; the hearing would be held two weeks later. There would be no continuances.

Before I knew it, it was the Saturday of Father’s Day weekend and the brief was due the following Monday by 4 p.m. For three days I’d be racing a short fuse.

That evening I made dinner for Dante. We talked about the test he’d taken on Friday in analytical geometry, how he’d used quadratic equations to find the foci of an ellipse. He drew a graph of the equations, but I still couldn’t follow the proof. His knowledge of math had surpassed mine, so I was relieved when the conversation turned to his AP English class and Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*.

“That’s a complicated play,” I said. “I didn’t read it until college.”

"It's not complicated," he said.

"What do you think Shakespeare had in mind?" I said.

"If they had divorce when Helen ran away with Paris, there wouldn't have been a Trojan War."

I had to laugh. "I guess that's right, but then we wouldn't have the woman whose face launched a thousand ships, nothing for Homer or Shakespeare to write about."

"Maybe that story was important before we had no-fault divorce, but it's always somebody's fault."

We did the dishes. Then I went back to my study.

A half hour later I was working on the brief, and at first didn't notice Dante when he came in. He stood in front of my desk as if applying for a job. On the front of his sweatshirt was a picture of pink freshwater dolphin leaping over the mud-brown water of the Amazon River. The inscription read: THE RAINFOREST YOU SAVE MAY SAVE YOU.

"I can't talk right now," I said. "I'll come see you in an hour."

It seemed only a moment passed before he called out, "Dad! The hour's up!"

The blinking cursor on my monitor pulled me in one direction. Dante's voice pulled me in another. I felt the acceleration of time; I felt time running out.

His room had a musty odor. Damp towels, and books were scattered over the floor and his bed.

He sat in front of his computer playing *The Return of Argos*. Argos and his warriors were coming home after winning a ten-year epic war, but their fighting wasn't over. There were still temptations, trials, and tribulations to surmount and enemies to defeat journeying home. The game would be won when Argos rescued his wife, the queen, in the ultimate battle. I wondered if Homer would have been amused to see his poem reduced to pixels, to see Odysseus' name changed to the name of his dog.

Dante said, "Will you drive me to the track meet tomorrow?"

"You know, my brief is due Monday."

"Please, Dad," he said. "The team bus leaves at six, and I need a day to sleep in."

"Call your mother." I stepped toward him to watch the battle on the screen.

“She went to Vegas with her boyfriend.”

“What boyfriend?”

“The one with the chinchilla farm. He skins them.”

I’d thought we’d been making progress in therapy. A boyfriend? An ache, like a cramp, spread from my chest to my groin. But with the brief due in a little more than forty hours, there was no time to dwell on it. And I certainly didn’t have time to take Dante to his track meet. Then I pictured my father at my high school baseball games. I could bring transcripts and my laptop to the track meet.

“It looks like Argos will defeat the Cyclops,” I said, stalling for time, weighing alternatives, “but he’d better watch out for Neptune in the next round.”

“It’s Poseidon,” he said, “not Neptune. You’re mixing up the Roman and Greek gods.” His voice was contemptuous. “Argos is fighting the Cyclops – Polyphemus – Poseidon’s son. Get it?”

“I know. It’s the *Odyssey*. A twenty-eight-hundred-year-old story. But one thing hasn’t changed. If it’s Neptune or Poseidon who gets you, you drown just the same.”

The soundtrack crackled. Argos had taken a hit. “Damn it!” Dante yelled. With a sweep of his arm he knocked papers off his desk. “It’s your fault I lost,” he screamed. “Your stupid dad jokes.” His face was crimson, his fists clenched.

“My fault?”

“I hate you!” he said. “It’s your fault Mom left!”

In the mirror on the wall behind him I saw rage on my face.

I said, “Why is it my fault your mother left?”

“Because you’re always telling us what to do,” he said, “telling Mom not to drink, telling me: ‘clean your room, type your reports, do the extra credit.’”

He was sitting on his bed. His curly hair hung over his eyes.

“What else is my fault?” I said.

“Everything,” he whispered. His shoulders shook. “I thought I was going to see Mom this weekend. She was supposed to take me to the track meet.”

I sat next to him on the bed, letting him cry. Bea had cancelled with Dante so often I’d forgotten it was her weekend. She’d promised she’d have Dante home by noon Sunday so we could spend most of Father’s Day

together. Why did Dante have to be caught in the web of complexity she threaded with her lies?

“Traffic should be light on Sunday. What time do we have to leave in the morning?” I said.

I worked past midnight, until the sentences in the casebooks blurred. Then I climbed into bed and picked up one of three books on my end table: Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, or Fitzgerald’s *The Crack Up*.

Before I began drafting Shirley’s appeal, I’d pulled these volumes off the shelf, intending to read them late at night after my brain had reached its saturation point. I read a chapter in one book, then moved on to a chapter in one of the others, rotating randomly among them. The further along I got, the more I fell into a compulsion – alternating among the books after reading a paragraph or two, rather than a chapter. Within a few days I couldn’t tell which book I was reading. One night I dreamt I was Scott Fitzgerald driving an ambulance off the side of a bridge during the Spanish Civil War. The next, I was Robert Jordan building Addie Bundren’s coffin or Hemingway consoling Zelda in the sanatorium. In sleep, I became the authors of the books I was reading and their characters, but I was always the wrong person in the wrong place.

Sunday, Father’s Day, as Dante eased the Jeep onto Pacific Coast Highway, a soft-blue morning light skipped across the whitecaps of a slow rolling surf. Santa Ana winds had pushed the smog out to sea. A horizon showcased views of sparkling high-rises and snow-capped mountains.

In his Hollywood days Faulkner had described smog as a vague high soft nebulous California haze. How would he describe it today, the pollution oxidizing our lungs?

On the Santa Monica Freeway, between the ocean and downtown, Dante pointed. “Those sea gulls followed us from home,” he said, and we laughed. We each wore blue-and-gold UCLA Bruins baseball caps. He’d had his learner’s permit for three months, but it was still hard to believe he was already driving.

“You’re doing great,” I said. “Not drifting in the lane.” His shoulders relaxed.

As we approached the Harbor Freeway interchange, we saw the tower where my firm had its Los Angeles offices. The skyscraper rose from the earth like purgatory, a bridge to the heavens.

Three months earlier, as I walked toward my corner office, the nameplate on the door looked like the engraving on a tombstone. Bea had left that weekend. Friday afternoon I'd come home to a dark house, her closet empty. Then came the text, "GEORGES: I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE. SO LONG. B." I hadn't been able to reach her on her cell or at her office. I still didn't know where she was.

And then, in the car, an explosion of understanding burned down my spine, setting my gonads on fire. Son of a bitch. Cuckold son of a bitch.

"Ennis Paulson," I said.

Dante glanced at me sideways. "What about him?"

"Did your mother go to Vegas with him?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Did she say he was her boyfriend?"

"If you saw them together, you'd understand," he said.

Bea's client, Ennis Paulson. The night before I'd been so concerned with Shirley and Dante, I hadn't seen what had been plainly in my field of view for a long time. The chinchilla farm in Nevada was one of the properties – a failed tax shelter sitting on land worth millions – Bea had persuaded a judge to award to Paulson during the dissolution of one of his partnerships.

I could see Paulson's weasel face, feel his greasy palm as he shook my hand, telling me how lucky I was to be married to the beautiful and brilliant Bea Bohem, who'd won his high-stakes case. When he started calling her cell at unusual hours, I'd assumed he was an incurable workaholic. I'd dismissed the clues, but now the truth burned through me like the blue flame of an acetylene torch.

In the rearview, my firm's high-rise receded. Beatrice wasn't coming home. I slipped off my wedding band, feeling loss akin to death. I didn't know what I was going to do. Figuring that out would have to wait.

"It's great spending the day together," I said to Dante.

"You can't stay," he said.

"Don't you want me to see you run?"

"And if I lose? All you care about is winning," he said.

“What gives you that idea?”

“All that pressure to get into a *good* college. I don’t care about college. I’m not going to college.”

“Were you going to ask your mother to stay?”

“That’s different. It doesn’t matter to *her* if I win *or* lose. She doesn’t ask about grades, doesn’t know I made varsity. I was going to surprise her.”

We drove on in silence, through a wasteland of strip malls and fast-food franchises. When we got to the Pomona College off-ramp, I reached over to squeeze his shoulder; he shrugged away.

A sudden gust rocked the Jeep. The Santa Ana winds were picking up.

Signs at the entrance to the parking lot near the stadium said: LOT FULL. I was wondering where we’d park when Dante pulled onto the shoulder of the road.

“Bye, Dad,” he said. “Thanks for the lift.”

“Hold on,” I said.

“I’m going to be late.”

“I want to talk,” I said. “It’s Father’s Day.” There was so much I wanted to say, but I couldn’t find the words. We sat at the foot of the mountains that had glowed with promise when we’d passed through Santa Monica an hour earlier. Now the effluvium was so thick I could barely see them. My throat was raw; my eyes stung. I squinted to see other parents wearing shorts, T-shirts, hats, and sunglasses, carrying wicker picnic baskets and red-and-white Igloo coolers.

He handed me a Father’s Day card. He said nothing, staring straight ahead as if wearing blinders.

“I’ll talk to your mother,” I said, “ask her to take you to your next meet.”

“I’ll ask her myself,” he said, grabbing his gym bag. Then he was running, dodging through the crowd, headed for the field.

I thought about finding a place to park, then sneaking into the bleachers. If Dante saw me, he’d be angry. If I stayed, I’d have less time to finish the brief. My heart was a pendulum, vacillating between the possibilities until I turned the Jeep around and headed back to Malibu.

Traffic in both directions on the Santa Monica Freeway moved like tortoises. I checked the dashboard clock and thought of Dante running his

race. What I couldn't see I imagined. I imagined him winning; I imagined him losing. I imagined congratulating him; I imagined consoling him. Would he accept either? I was at a standstill and my son was running as fast as he could.

The westbound vehicles came to a halt. I put the Jeep in park and felt that odd sensation that comes over me when stuck in traffic. Instead of speeding along on its way to wherever it needs to be, my body – the heart pumping blood, the muscles in my shoulders contracting, the side of my head throbbing – sits there: a time-bomb of expectation. I wasn't where I wanted to be. I wasn't where I was. I was nowhere.

I turned on the radio. Bob Seger was singing he wished he didn't know now what he didn't know then, and I visualized Shirley gasping for each breath. One day soon she wouldn't have enough lung tissue to absorb oxygen, and she'd suffer death by suffocation unless, mercifully, the morphine took her first. I was her hope for justice, and her brief had to be filed in about thirty hours. Then Janis Joplin was singing "Down on Me." I hadn't heard one song end or the other begin.

I slumped in my seat, pierced by sunlight magnified by the windshield glass. What was I fighting? Everything. I was fighting where I was, who I was, where I was going. I'll be here now, I thought. I'll be here, not moving, going nowhere in gridlock on the Santa Monica Freeway. My heartbeat slowed, my muscles relaxed, and my mind, which had been working hard to be elsewhere, focused on where I was, alongside accumulated debris piled against the concrete barrier: a pair of torn trousers, a doll without a head, and a single sneaker that had lost its laces. The shoe had been run over until it was tire-black.

I got out of the Jeep to get a better look. How did these things get there? Did they just fly out of cars? Fall off the back of a truck? Did someone throw them? Was the head of the doll in a station wagon in Pico Rivera? Pacoima? Pasadena? The discarded items took on a life of their own, as if they were a collection of Duchamp's found objects.

I picked up the shoe. It was just a running shoe, but I held it tenderly, examining it in one hand and then turning it over to examine it in the other. I felt every wound as car after car had run over it, crushing its beauty, rending it into a vague semblance of charcoal canvas.

The guy in the car behind me honked his horn. Traffic was inching forward. I made my way back to the Jeep still holding the shoe.

Tires screeched. A Highway Patrol car – its emergency lights flashing – barreled down the service lane, engulfing me in a vortex of dust that whipped behind the cruiser like a comet's tail.

I was going to toss the shoe back but changed my mind. When I got back in the car, I laid it on the front passenger seat, put the Jeep in drive, and resumed the tortuous odyssey home.

The Tallis

Cars and trucks inched along bumper to bumper on the Santa Monica Freeway. Our minivan, black, just a year old, lurched, stopped, and then did it again like a toddler learning to walk. My hands trembled, my whole body quaked, my heart raced. I was numb to my core. Overwhelmed by grief, guilt, and an unmistakable and unshakable awareness of irony, I was virtually helpless. It was Father's Day and we were going to be late for the unveiling of Steven's headstone. But my wife, Nettie, sitting beside me was calm.

She was embroidering a tallis for Steven. She'd begun working on it soon after sitting shiva. These days she rarely spoke to me, as if conversation would interrupt her concentration. The balls of silk, the embroidery needles, the tallis were always in her hands. She didn't take it to bed. She didn't have to. It was her reason for staying up until it was too late to make love.

Nettie had cut the tallis from the finest white silk cloth. She'd knitted and then sewn on fringes. Above the fringes with blue thread she'd embroidered the Twenty-Third Psalm in Hebrew. And she'd sewn Stars of David on the tallis where they would have lain over the suit collar of a thirteen-year-old boy. I suppose they were there to bestow blessings, prayers passed from mother to son, protection in death from harm she couldn't shield him from in life.

The tallis was soft as a baby's breath she would say.

There was something special about the fringes. They didn't just fall from the ends like afterthoughts— they had an energy of their own, bounce, zeal.

She was forever perfecting it, taking out stitches, putting in new ones, and now I understood that it wouldn't be finished until we reached the cemetery. Steven would have been a bar mitzvah this year. Today, Nettie was going to lay the tallis on his grave.

A year ago, there was an accident on the San Diego Freeway. We were going 45 or 50 and I was driving, taking Steven and four of his friends home from soccer practice. The boys were rowdy, nothing out of the ordinary, but I'd had a rough day and had left fires burning at the store when Nettie had called to say she couldn't pick them up. When they didn't calm down after I'd told them twice to stop cutting up, I yelled, "God damn it."

Four or five car lengths ahead a crate fell from a truck. Tumbling and splintering it crashed into us. A steel rod hurtled through the windshield, impaling my boy. No one else was seriously hurt.

Before the impact I hadn't taken my eyes off the road. Yet if I'd been more focused, paying closer attention, thinking more about driving than problems at the store, if I hadn't cursed, I could have avoided the collision.

It wasn't my fault according to the Highway Patrol, according to our attorney. The truck driver was cited and his employer's insurance company paid the policy limits. Still I blame myself.

Nettie never said it was my fault. She didn't have to. The tallis said it all.

Traffic eastbound and westbound gridlocked. The towers of Century City loomed through the smog. Litter was scattered along the center divider: discarded clothing reduced to rags, a skateboard without wheels, a bent bicycle wheel. And in the emergency lane, in front of a fire-engine-red Jeep, a man with a loose screw, wearing a UCLA Bruins baseball cap, was scavenging in the junk. He picked up a torn, blackened tennis shoe, then he held it up to the sky as if inspecting a jewel or an object of art.

The vehicles in his lane began to move, and still holding the shoe, he got back in the Jeep. A moment later, a highway patrol cruiser, siren blaring, sped down the westbound emergency lane right past where the man had stood only a moment before.

Then the cars ahead of us began to move, and I took an off ramp. The light was green, so I accelerated. Against the traffic light, a boy on a bicycle jumped the curb, popping a wheelie just a few yards in front of the minivan. I hit the brakes; the van fishtailed. We were going 35 when we hit the bike and just a moment before we did, the boy jumped off. The bike was crushed.

On the pavement, I held him. His shattered ulna and radius pierced his arm like prongs of a pitchfork. Blood pooled on the street, soaking the boy and drenching me too. He was bleeding to death.

Nettie got out of the Jeep calling 911. I cradled the boy, struggling with one hand to rip off my necktie.

A blue Prius stopped behind us. The driver got out of his car. He was at least six feet two, hair closely cropped, young, heavysset, black as ebony, wearing a white lab coat. He hurried over to us and said in a pronounced accent I couldn't place, "I'm a doctor." A name was embroidered in blue thread on the lab coat: Ras Demeke, MD. The face of an immigrant.

Nettie handed the tallis to the doctor. He took it from her, kissed the fringes, and then, kneeling, he used it to tighten a tourniquet around the boy's upper arm. The bleeding stopped.

The doctor traced his fingers over the embroidered Hebrew letters.

"The Lord is my shepherd . . ." he said. "*Gam ki elech be'gei tzalmavet, lo ira ra ki ata imadi,*" he continued, in Hebrew. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

A sound of sirens grew louder.

Nettie sat in the street and held me.

Dressed to Kill

It was the first anniversary of Jake's death. In the morning he'd been standing on his front lawn reading the *L.A. Times* when a Chevy Suburban jumped the curb. Jake – his head shaved, his bearing military, his athleticism at 62 (we were evenly matched in tennis), in one of his elegant suits, a contrast to the earring he wore like a pirate, he said, to instill fear in his enemies – in perfect health during the last moment of his life, had no way to know he'd drawn his last breath. He was here, and then, in a heartbeat, he wasn't.

The day before Jake was killed, we'd filed an *amicus curiae* brief in the Supreme Court supporting the Patient Protection Affordable Care Act, the Obama healthcare law. That evening we talked about it in my office, sitting on antique armchairs, a gift from Beatrice, my ex. Each chair was crowned with a carved cornice framing a cameo: one of the Queen, the other of her prince.

"That's us," Bea had said, "Victoria and Albert."

Tempus fugit. Looking through the floor-to-ceiling windows in my office that were meant to provide views of Los Angeles, white sands from Malibu to Huntington Beach, the cliffs of Palos Verdes, Santa Catalina Island, and the sun sinking beneath the Pacific with a flash across the spectrum of light reflecting on the ocean, the last breath of day heralding the falling night, but all I could see was smog.

In one hour, in the Jacob Marley Memorial Conference Room on the next floor, I had a meeting to negotiate the terms of a multi-billion-dollar, multi-bank loan to finance the construction of a transnational undersea fiber-optic-cable network. I directed phone calls to voice mail and locked my office door.

I'd made a New Year's resolution, still unfulfilled, to resume dating. There was no connection between Jake's death and my subsequent self-imposed solitude, they were unrelated events occurring, coincidentally, with near simultaneity. To think otherwise would require psychological analysis, the words meaning literally, an examination of the soul, a province of faith, the work of theologians; for the rest of us, contemplation of this sort is likely to obscure reality and very unlikely to be worthwhile.

Once, early in our relationship, after we'd received a counter to a client's offer, Jake had said, "Georges, what do you think they really want?"

"If we question their intentions, we'll never close the deal because there are infinite possibilities."

He settled into his chair, his elbows resting on its arms, the corresponding fingers of his right and left hands touching at their tips, forming the shape of a steeple. "How does a former graduate student of divinity," he'd said, closing his hands with his fingers entwined, "become indifferent to allegory, immune to allusion, become a man who says he's never met a stereotype or a cliché he didn't like?"

His question escaped me. Life is short, its quality fragile, and so the imperative to seize the day should be self-evident. People who understood this invented stereotypes, people like me, people who didn't have time to kill or a moment to lose. I don't have to reinvent the wheel to know how to talk to a postal clerk in a bad mood or a cop who's pulled me over. And I eschew subtext like the plague. Not only does superficiality foster efficiency, it reduces the risk of opening old wounds.

Stereotyping made me reluctant to try Internet dating. If my friends got wind of it, would they think I was unable to weather a sea change? But if I couldn't find a woman to date, figure out how to begin a new relationship after a failed seventeen-year marriage, would they think I was unable to navigate the perfect storm of my personal life?

Jake had encouraged me to try Internet dating, and so on this auspicious day I logged on to LADating.com. I uploaded recent photos of myself – one in a suit and tie, another with my son at one of his high school track meets – and was instructed to complete a profile, to approach the task as a labor of love, to blow my own horn, to cast my bread upon the waters.

It was right up my alley—with one caveat. As a corporate lawyer in a white-shoe firm, my stereotype served me well because my adversaries assumed they understood who I was and what I wanted, an advantage worth its weight in gold.

But I didn't want my corporate-lawyer stereotype to lead me to the wrong kind of woman, one who didn't share my values. So I began by writing about my politics, saying, "If you're a neocon or a retro-con, if you're okay with tax cuts for the super-rich, global warming, underfunding education, overturning *Roe vs. Wade*, or any other right-wing agenda, please don't waste your time or mine."

Answering the other questions was duller than dishwater – Should children be seen and not heard? Do you prefer sex with the lights on or off? I was ready to cut bait and bail but I saw the light at the end of the tunnel: only a few questions remained. I said that my son, Dante, in the twelfth grade, lived with me, that I wasn't religious and wasn't looking for a woman who was.

I was done. The program sent me the profiles of women that matched mine.

Thirty minutes before my meeting, I dived in.

A schoolteacher was first. She had gorgeous red hair and her similes were Homeric – “Feeling sad because my husband left me would be like crying over spilled milk. It's water under the bridge” – her prose replete with phrases that rolled off my tongue like water off a duck's back. We were kindred spirits. But I just didn't like the cut of her jib.

The next woman was a lawyer, like Bea. I moved on.

Grace, an aerobics instructor, was looking for a man to make her feel weak as a kitten.

Bunny, a widow, was the C.E.O. of her family's charitable trust. Her given name was Rachel, but her grandmother had called her Bunny. She was fifty, two years younger than I, but didn't look older than thirty-five, prompting me to wonder if she'd honored the recent-photo rule. Her face lacked symmetry of perfection, one eye drifting to the right. In one photo she wore running shorts. I was riveted by her legs.

I brought up the next profile but couldn't concentrate, so I went back to Bunny's. She wasn't like Beatrice. Bunny had wavy brunette hair; Bea had tight strawberry curls. Bunny was tan; Bea was pale. Bunny's stature contrasted with Bea's petite frame.

How did I overlook her comments about religion? I didn't have time to read her profile word for word. My meeting would begin in ten minutes. If I didn't write to Bunny then, I probably never would. If what she'd said about religion had registered, I never would have contacted her, not because religious experience renders the mind shallow but because Bunny, like Bea, was Jewish. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

I waited for her at an outdoor table at a café in Brentwood. It had rained earlier, leaving the taste of the air afresh with possibility, its scent

sweetened with the aroma of roses, heliotrope, and lavender displayed in front of the floral shop next door.

Walking toward me on a sidewalk along San Vicente Boulevard, leafy coral trees grown tall in the majestic median, purple blooms of Jacaranda littering side streets, Bunny stood out: confident, regal, stunning in a double-breasted red raincoat. She had the visage of an angel; her photos had been unjust.

When I rose to greet her, she said in her Germanic accent, “Let’s not talk about anything routine.”

“What’s routine?” I said.

“Oh, you know, the weather, the war on terror, work.”

Boys on skateboards, no older than Dante, zipped by.

“I see your point. When it rains, it pours; war is hell; work like a dog, sleep like a log.”

That broke the ice. She laughed. “How did you meet Beatrice?”

“She was a litigator; I was a transactional lawyer at the same firm.”

“Harold was a lawyer,” she said.

“How did you meet?”

“Don’t you think it poetic,” she said, “that a girl named Bunny landed a cocktail-waitress job at a Playboy Club? That’s where I met Harold. I was his bunny.”

Two months later I wasn’t sure where we was going but it was going well. Bunny took Dante and me to see the Dodgers play the Giants at Dodger Stadium, surprising and delighting us with her fluency in baseball history. By that time, I knew she was Jewish. Jake would have scoffed at my superstition, but I wondered what he’d have said about her continuing refusal to talk about the weather, the war on terror, or work.

When I spoke to Bunny a few days after the Dodgers’ game to confirm the time I’d pick her up that evening, she said that she’d stopped dating other men. I was a single dad with a never-ending workload, so I hadn’t dated anyone else, but still, I was surprised, not so much by her decision as by her telling me about it because I’d done nothing to initiate sex and neither had she. Was she saying it was time for that to change?

I abandoned the thought, a textbook example of how subtext can lead to misunderstanding.

Then Dante called. “Mom didn’t show up at track practice,” he said. “Again. She’s not at work, not answering her cell. Dad, will you buy me a car?”

I bit the bullet and called Bunny to ask for a rain check.

“Dante can come with us to dinner,” Bunny said.

“He has final exams in a few weeks,” I said.

“It’s strange she would forget to pick up her son,” Bunny said.

“A year before she left us – she didn’t show up for the science fair, where Dante’s project was in contention for first place. Dante was upset, and I was furious. Later, I said to her, ‘you love your job more than anything else. More than you love us.’ She said it was true.”

Bunny insisted that our next date be dinner at her house. When I arrived, she was wearing a low-cut blouse. I was careful not to let her see me looking at her cleavage.

In the kitchen, she worked on a tiled countertop, her back to a center island with six gas burners and an array of radishes, red peppers, and spinach. Shredding cabbage, she spoke of Harold’s cancer, painting the details – the regression of a robust man into a vegetative state – with painful precision.

“The tumor crushed his brain,” she said, using a paring knife to julienne carrots, “and that was tragic because he had such a fine mind.”

An aroma of oranges and caramelized onions wafted from a saucepan. A chart titled “Fruits and Vegetables with the Highest Anti-oxidant Capacity” was taped to her refrigerator.

The countertop tiles were Navajo white except for repeating distinct decorative tiles set randomly but always in tandem. The image on one was the Greek goddess Themis, holding the hilt of a sword in one hand, the scales of justice in the other. The image on the other tile was a serpent entwining the staff of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine and healing, a kitsch touch to an otherwise exquisite décor.

“Imagine,” she said, carrying carrots to the center island, “seeing someone you love suffering metastasizing sarcoma in the parietal lobe.”

As she moved to inspect the saucepan, her breasts brushed against my back as I diced a red pepper.

“Damn it,” I said. I’d cut two fingers.

She pressed a towel against the wound. “Hold this.”

She soaked my hand in a bowl of hot soapy water, rinsed it, poured hydrogen peroxide over my cut fingers, dried them, and wrapped them in gauze. She secured the gauze with surgical tape.

“You were right there for Harold,” I said, “picking up the medical jargon.”

Her face inscrutable. Tension mounted until a pot boiled over. She turned off the gas burner.

“I didn’t learn medicine from Harold’s doctors. I’m a surgeon,” she said.

“But you said you’re the C.E.O. of your family’s eleemosynary foundation.”

“I am,” she said.

She wiped the blood-soaked peppers off the cutting board, cleaned the knife, and went to work on a new pepper. She said, “When I began Internet dating my profile said I was a surgeon. The only men who wrote to me were other doctors and hypochondriacs.”

“What was wrong with the doctors?” I said.

“They weren’t emotionally expressive. Know what I mean?”

“What else did you expect from a doctor?” I said.

“You know, I’m an advocate of healthy ingredients,” she said, the knife pointed at me, rotating slowly.

“I’ll finish the radishes,” I said.

“You’ve spilled enough blood for one night.”

“Lacking emotion isn’t bad,” I said. “I wouldn’t want someone who was emotional cutting me.”

“Will you pour me a glass of wine?” she said.

With my bandaged fingers, I fumbled with a corkscrew.

“You can never eat enough veggies,” she said. “The trick is to steam them lightly to enhance digestion while preserving the vitamins.” She arranged steaming broccoli, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts on a platter around an oval bowl of wild rice.

As I eased the cork from the bottle, I said, “With a doctor, what you see is what you get.”

“Is that so, counselor?” she said, covering the vegetables-and-rice platter.

“Don’t get me wrong,” I said, pouring two glasses of Sauvignon Blanc.

“I like them.”

She sipped the wine. “Shall we put the bottle on ice?”

“I represent medical organizations. The American College of Surgeons for instance.”

Her face softened. “That’s interesting. What do you do for the ACS?”

“Tax advice,” I said, “nonprofit compliance with IRS regulations.”

“Do you advise the ACS Political Action Committee?”

“You’ve changed the subject,” I said. “We’ve dated for two months—”

“You know,” she said, “it’s taken three-and-a-half months for us to find the time for me to make you dinner. What a shame.”

She peeked in the oven. “It’s best when the sauce is served right out of the skillet.” She poured broth into a pan. “Don’t use butter. And please don’t consider something pedestrian like cornstarch as a thickening agent.” She sprinkled white powder into the pan. “Cassava root,” she said. She poured in other ingredients and stirred, then washed her hands. “Soup’s on.”

During dinner I said, “If I didn’t know you were a surgeon, I’d have thought you were a valedictorian of Le Cordon Bleu.”

“When we met, I didn’t think we’d have a second date if I told you I was a doctor.”

“Why not?”

“You were looking for someone who was the opposite of Beatrice: a high-powered type-A personality. I wanted you to have enough time to find out that I’m low-key.”

She must have thought I was born yesterday.

I didn’t call Bunny for a few days not because I was angry but because I wanted perspective. We laughed; usually we held hands. She and Dante got along famously. She hadn’t lied overtly because she hadn’t allowed talk of work. But I couldn’t accept her explanation. Pretext is the sinister sibling of subtext. Jake would have advised me to let bygones be bygones, and that’s what I did.

Considering the possibility of after-dinner intimacy, before our next date I took 100 mg of Viagra. Why roll the dice?

I took her to one of those nouveau cuisine places that was all the rage: miniscule portions presented as works of art, exotic wines, exquisite

service. But I couldn't catch a break. Rather than talk romance, Bunny became nostalgic.

She said, "I was a bundle of nerves the day Harold took me home to meet his mother. I had this feeling that he was the one. I knew this was going to be my last chance to make a really good first impression. You know what I mean?"

"I haven't done well with that question."

"What question?" She tapped her fingers on the stem of her wineglass. "Harold takes me into the kitchen to meet Ruth, his mother. She's at the stove stirring a pot of soup with a wooden spoon. Before Harold says a word she gives me a look, like she's inspecting the merchandise.

"Well, she turns back to the stove and stirs the soup again like I wasn't even there. I'm holding my breath, waiting for someone to say something. Finally Harold says, 'Ma, this is Bunny.'

"Nothing. She doesn't say a thing. Keeps stirring the soup. Then she taps the spoon on the pot, lays it on the counter, and says to Harold – in Yiddish, mind you – 'Get this *shikse* out of my house.' Then she picks up the spoon, all nonchalant, and stirs again, as if I'm already gone."

Bunny sipped her wine.

"I'm standing there trembling, thinking of my Grandma Eppie, a holocaust survivor just like Ruth, and I remember what Eppie used to say. It was like . . .," she finished her wine, "like it was her motto: 'You don't get nothin' you don't work for.' In tough times, I always hear her voice, and her voice is telling me to fight for Harold, even though I want to cry and slink away. "So I say, '*Ikh badoyer az ir vilt zikh mit mir nosh bakunin, Froy Siegel, vayl ikh bin a sheyne Yidishe meyd.*'"

"What does that mean?"

"It means: It's too bad you don't want to get to know me, Mrs. Siegel, because I'm a nice Jewish girl."

She continued in a softer voice but with fiercer sentiment.

"Well— she still doesn't say a word, just stirs and stirs the soup. So I say, 'Harold, please take me home.' Then, with her back still to me she says, 'Bunny, come here and taste the soup.' I taste the soup. 'A little more salt,' I say. Then she says, 'Bunny? What kind of name is that?'"

Then Bunny said, "You say you're not religious but you're Jewish, right?"

"I'm not," I said. "I'm a divinity school dropout."

“You never mentioned that.”

“Is this a problem?”

“Not at all,” she said, slipping her hand out of mine.

When Bunny and I first spoke, I thought she was German because of her accent. After I met her I wondered if she was Italian because when she spoke her mouth and her hands moved in concert. When she asked if I were Jewish, I thought dinner was our coda.

Afterward, I was laconic but Bunny was bubbly, telling one story after another.

On her doorstep she was still talking.

“So where was I?” she said, nibbling her pinkie as if it were a standard technique to stimulate memory. “Oh, now I remember. The class I taught in bunny school: Advanced Erotica. Here,” she said, “let me show you.” She lifted my hand to her lips and sucked my forefinger into her mouth, wrapping her tongue around it. I was still catching my breath when she said, “That was lesson one.” She brushed her lips over mine, opened the door, and said, “Call me soon?”

Walking to my car, my arousal combined with astonishment, as if my erection switched on a light in my brain. I wondered why I hadn’t seen Bea not wanting sex as a sign our marriage was in trouble. I wondered if sublimating my libido had impaired my vision.

When I got home, I called Bunny.

“Georges!” she said. “Thank heaven you’re safe. I was worried about you driving after you polished off that second bottle of Perrier.”

“Actually,” I said, “I did get stopped, and my carbonation level was over the legal limit. But I knew the cop, so he let me go with a warning.”

We talked about our next date, which, because of conflicting commitments, wasn’t going to be for several weeks. But we spoke every evening.

We talked about Harold. He’d been a constitutional lawyer, argued civil rights cases before the Supreme Court, been a champion of workers, victims, and consumers. And he was active in politics, a die-hard liberal, a stalwart of the Democratic Party.

“You remind me of him,” she said.

“I couldn’t fill his shoes.”

“Not to worry,” she said.

I told Bunny about Jake, our work, our passion for tennis, our last evening together. Following a twenty-year career in the navy, he'd joined the firm right out of law school and worked under my supervision until he made partner.

"So you were his mentor?"

We'd mentored each other, he'd become like an older brother, especially after my father developed Alzheimer's.

Bunny spoke of Eppie, who'd lived by the code *Arbeit macht frei*: the Nazi slogan written in the crown of the arched entry gates to the concentration camps— Work shall set you free. In Birkenau she sewed Stars of David on prisoner uniforms.

Bunny's father brought Eppie with him to America when he was selected as a post doc in theoretical physics by John Archibald Wheeler at Princeton. When Bunny was two, her parents were killed in a train crash. Raised by Eppie, Bunny grew up poor. When she entered first grade, she spoke only Yiddish.

Missing her, I wondered if the cure for loneliness was passage through greater loneliness.

When we finally saw each other next, we went to see *Romeo and Juliet* at the Kodak Theatre. On our way, she pointed out her synagogue on Hollywood Boulevard.

"It's Friday night," I said. "Am I keeping you from Shabbat services?"

"Since Harold died I hardly go. Maybe I should have checked 'not very religious,' too."

During intermission she leaned against a column in the orchestra-level lobby. Wearing stiletto heels and décolletage, she was a latter-day Aphrodite.

"Would you like something to drink?" I said.

"Red wine?" she said. Then she took hold of my sport coat and pulled me close, caressing my inner thigh with her knee. She whispered, "After the show will you be ready for lesson two?"

"We can leave now," I said.

"But I want to find out how it ends."

"You won't like it," I said. "It's not happy."

"You devil! You've seen it before. Don't tell me what happens."

I took the escalator to the wine bar on the mezzanine level. On my way back I imagined Bunny standing in front of me, auburn hair spilling over bare shoulders, the back of her dress unzipped, candlelight and the majesty of Beethoven's *Eroica* enhancing the moment. She lowered her dress to her waist, lingering before unhooking her bra and letting it fall.

Before it hit the floor, I was startled by a young man wearing a full-length fur coat who screamed, "Get the fuck out of my life!" He shrugged under an arm draped over his shoulder, lurching into my path, splattering wine on my white shirt.

His companion, an older man, steel-gray hair hanging over his collar, wearing a blue blazer and red ascot, tried to mitigate the damage. "I'm 'tho 'thorry," he said, patting his handkerchief against my chest, creating a Rorschach inkblot in red and white.

Classic personification of archetype. I had to love them.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" It was a new voice, shrill, belonging to a mousy woman, also wearing fur. "What's going on?" She put her arm around the older man.

The younger man looked at the floor, his bravado dissolved, his voice a simpering wisp. "Look what Daddy did," he said. "He made that man spill wine on my mink."

"It-it's chi-chin-Chinchilla," the father said. "How many t-t-times do I have to t-tell you that, son?"

"One day," the woman said to her son, "you will regret the way you treated us with disrespect."

The father offered to pay for the cleaning, but I had more pressing matters in mind.

When I stepped off the escalator, Bunny was waiting. She kissed me, then took the wine.

"What happened?"

"Don't ask," I said.

She sipped the wine. "This is awful," she said, dropping it into the trash.

After the show, inching our way up Hollywood Boulevard, Bunny stroked my thigh.

"Will you come to a fundraiser I'm hosting next Saturday?" she said.

"Sure. What's the cause?"

She kicked off her heels, extended her tongue, curling it until it touched her upper lip. Her short dress made me imagine what was concealed above the hem. Her eyes followed mine. She shifted in her seat, moving her thighs farther apart. “Abolishing Medicare—”

“You’re joking?” I said.

“... as we know it.” She rolled her wrist and extended her index finger as if she were royalty, pointing to the cars in the next lane. “The light’s green.”

I was thinking furiously, at a loss for words, pulling into the intersection, when Bunny said with alarm, pointing, “That’s Abe.”

Near the flowerbeds on the grounds of the Fifth Church of Christ Science, a cop holding a baton was jawboning three white punks dressed, coiffed, and pierced to personify their rebellion against conformity: multi-hued Mohawk haircuts, lip studs, and nose rings. The cop stood between the punks and a slender young black man wearing a dark suit, white shirt and a thin, dark tie.

I took my camera out of the center console and handed it to Bunny. “Do you know how to use this?” I said. She had already turned the camera on, switched the mode to live view, and depressed the red video record button

“Which one is Abe?” I said. “The one wearing a suit?”

“His father was killed a few months ago, hit and run.” She pointed to her synagogue, a half mile up the street. “He must be walking home from services.”

“He’s Jewish?”

“Yes,” she said, “he’s Jewish— and black.”

I pulled the Jeep to the curb and heard the cop say, “I said, ‘disperse.’”

Abe yelled, “Racist pigs!”

The cop, perhaps unaware of how close he was to Abe, but perhaps not, whirled. The butt of his baton struck Abe’s forehead, opening a gash above his eye. He collapsed. The punks cheered.

I got out of the Jeep and said to the cop, “Call an ambulance.”

The cop said to me, “Get back in your car.” His voice was calm, but he was slapping the baton against an open hand. The veins on his biceps bulged. He looked as if he spent half his time lifting weights and the other half taking steroids. His name tag said VASQUEZ. I didn’t get the impression the Fourth Amendment was on his mind. If anything, he was thinking excessive force was a virtue.

“Don’t swing that club again,” Bunny yelled. She was standing on the sidewalk in her stocking feet, pointing my camera at Vasquez; the recording light blinked.

“Abe?” she yelled. He didn’t stir. “Are you okay?”

“Fuck you, bitch,” one of the punks hooted.

“Nigger lover,” another one hollered.

“Charming,” Bunny said.

Vasquez gave the punks a menacing look; still jeering, they sauntered off.

Bunny hurried toward Abe; before she reached him, the cop blocked her path.

Bunny said, “I’m a doctor—”

A siren blasted. A police car – lights flashing – pulled up to the curb behind the Jeep. The cop riding shotgun swung his car door open and got out, pointing a gun at Bunny. A metallic voice resonated from a speaker on the roof of the squad car, “Drop your weapon; raise your hands.”

Bunny dropped my camera on the lawn and raised her hands, which were steady, her body language bespeaking far greater calm than I could summon.

The cop who’d been driving got out of the car and briskly walked toward Vasquez and me. Did I know a sergeant with a salt-and-pepper mustache? I almost expected him to say, How ya doin’, Georges? But he didn’t. He walked past me as if I weren’t there.

The sergeant’s partner put away his gun and got a first-aid kit.

Bunny knelt beside Abe.

Abe groaned, “*Prius non nocere.*”

“*Prius non nocere illico,*” she said.

The sergeant was pointing at my camera.

Vásquez said, “*Ninguna manera que jode.*”

I walked up to them.

“Have we met?” I said to the sergeant. He avoided eye contact. “I’m Georges Bohem, counsel for the Police League Pension Fund.” I offered him my hand; he ignored it. “My work for the league is pro bono,” I added.

“Not your man,” he said, still not looking at me.

“A lawyer,” Vasquez said. “What’d I tell you?”

The sergeant seemed to consider this. Then he looked at me, addressing me in the third person. “But he doesn’t sue cops?”

“That’s right,” I said.

My answer was followed by a palpable silence as the sergeant looked at his partner helping Bunny with Abe, then at my camera. He stepped very close, finally offering me his hand. “Frank Artaza. Appreciate your work for the League,” he said, adding, “*Pro bono.*”

Nodding toward Bunny and Abe, the sergeant said, “What language was that?”

“Latin. He said, ‘Do no harm.’ She said, ‘Do no immediate harm.’”

He looked at me with incomprehension.

“It’s the Hippocratic Oath,” I said. I still couldn’t detect a reaction. “He was joking,” I said. “He told Dr. Siegel not to make his injuries worse.”

“She’s a doctor?” the sergeant said. “Thought she was a celebrity in that outfit.”

Vasquez got Abe’s driver’s license. “Abebe Demeke,” he said. “No record, no warrants. She says he’s a medical student at UCLA.”

As I walked away from the cops, the sergeant said, “They were just driving by?”

“I didn’t ask. Maybe they were stalking him.”

Bunny and Abe were sitting on the lawn, quietly arguing when I came over to introduce myself. Abe was holding a blood-stained towel to his forehead.

Bunny said to me, “May I use your phone? Mine’s in the car.”

I handed it to her and she punched in a number.

I held out my hand to Abe. “Georges Bohem.”

Abe held out his hand, tried to get up, but fell back into a sitting position on the lawn.

Still holding the phone to her ear, Bunny said in a querulous tone, “Abe!”

Abe’s hand was still extended. I took it and we shook.

“Abe Demeke,” he said, softly, deferentially. “Wish the circumstances were otherwise.”

Still holding my phone, Bunny said, “I couldn’t reach Ras, left voice mail.”

“Ras?” I said, sitting on the lawn beside them.

“My brother,” Abe said. He smiled mischievously. “There’re too many doctors in our family.”

“We’re not going to get into that tonight,” Bunny said. She made another call.

Abe said, “Bunny, I’m okay.”

Bunny was having none of it. “You need a few stitches,” she said. She’d spoken to a friend, a neurologist in the emergency department at UCLA hospital. Abe was going there. Bunny’s neurologist friend would call her and Ras after he’d examined Abe.

Still protesting, Abe left in an ambulance. As it drove away, Bunny put her arms around me, pressing her chest against mine, shivering. I felt her heartbeat.

“I’m a mess,” she said.

“I’ve never seen anyone more beautiful.” The words were still on my lips when she kissed me.

Traffic was a stop-and-go echo—*abolish Medicare, abolish Medicare*.

I took Vine to Sunset; the congestion was worse, but my frustration with the traffic was trifling compared to the resentment smoldering within me like a fire in the hold of a ship, unseen on the main deck but dangerous nonetheless.

“I don’t understand,” I said, “abolishing Medicare. We’ve reformed healthcare.”

“We didn’t get it right,” she said.

“That’s a Tea Party slogan!” I said.

“Let’s not do this,” she said.

“It’s code to camouflage right-wing agendas.”

“I don’t talk code. You know what I mean?” she said, her voice silky. “So if I say the government has to respect the Constitution, that’s exactly what I mean, no more, no less.”

“More code,” I said. She folded her hands in her lap. A light rain fell.

When we arrived at her home, she surprised me, saying, “C’mon in for a nightcap.”

“I can’t drink. I have to drive.”

“Not tonight you don’t,” she said, opening her car door, looking at me seductively as if a harsh word hadn’t been spoken.

She put on a Mozart symphony, dimmed the living room lights.

“‘Abolish Medicare as we know it’ sounds familiar,” I said, pacing.

“I’m prescribing an extra-dry martini.” She returned from the kitchen with two freezer-chilled martini glasses, vodka, vermouth, a cocktail shaker, and a bucket of ice.

“Are you talking vouchers?” I said.

“Making a perfect martini isn’t simple. You chill the vodka without letting it get watery. The lazy woman’s solution is to keep a bottle in the freezer but that makes premium vodka syrupy and masks its aroma.” She waved the open bottle close to her nose and inhaled, as if judging a fine wine. “Subtlety separates the sublime from the banal. You know what I mean?” She swirled two drops of vermouth in each glass and emptied them, filled the cocktail shaker with ice, then vodka, shook it briskly, then strained the drinks through the ice. She added a twist of lemon.

“Only a philistine would eat an olive with a martini.” She shuddered. “Like pouring salt into a glass of Dom Pérignon.”

She sat on the sofa, patted the cushion beside her. “Try it.”

I sat in an armchair beside the sofa, sipped the cocktail.

“How does the government infringe your constitutional rights?”

“Come over here and cuddle.”

“Look,” I said, “if we have sex—”

“Did I suggest sex?” she said. “Why be hasty?” She took my hand, pulling me gently toward her. “Okay. I’ll talk Medicare and the Constitution; maybe that’ll put us in the mood.”

I sat beside her. She unbuttoned my shirt. In a soothing voice, between interrogatives such as “How does that feel?” and “Is that better?” and sipping our drinks, she massaged my back and told me that she and her partners were aggrieved by the inefficiencies of Medicare.

“Doctors, hospitals, and taxpayers shoulder the burden while the pharmaceutical and health-insurance companies make money like slot machines. They don’t break laws; they make them.”

I was succumbing to the melody of her voice, its cadence, my suspicions allayed, my muscles relaxed, the vodka having its effect, ready to move on.

But when the back massage ended; her oratory intensified. As she spoke, her hands moved in syncopation incessantly, indefatigability, inexorably— rhythmically punctuating each point with a downward thrust or a wagging finger as if delivering a sermon, a call for justice, a call to arms.

“Whoa,” I said, interrupting her rush of words. “Explain it later, your plan to reform—”

“Abolish and replace.”

“— Medicare by raising money for the Tea Party.”

“Ideologies are irrelevant, you know? Ideas matter, action matters, the Constitution matters.”

“How does this work, promoting a liberal cause by donating to a right-wing movement?”

“What’s liberal?” she said.

“Containing medical costs altruistically.”

“Altruism,” she said, “like privacy, is fiction.”

She hurried on. Her medical partnership had the financial means to publicize its views with TV and radio ads. So they hired a campaign-finance attorney, who advised them to form a non-profit political action committee. “The attorney said we’d have to ask the F.E.C. for advisory opinions to avoid the risk of criminal prosecution. We need government permission to exercise free speech.”

“It levels the playing field,” I said.

She stood. “Good intention is no defense to censorship.”

“You’re proposing—” I said.

“Georges, don’t tell me what I’m proposing. You say you’re liberal. Liberal means open-minded, but what you really say is you’re unwilling to consider change. That’s intolerance.”

“It’s not intolerance. It’s principle.”

“Your problem is you can’t tell the difference— my problem is you can’t respect our differences.” She opened a journal, thumbed through pages.

“*Citizens United* is letting the oligarchy buy elections,” I said. “Your free speech talk is naïve.”

She slammed the journal on the end table. “I won’t be patronized!”

At her front door she said, “And I thought you were a *mensh*.”

I walked through the rain from the portico to her driveway, following granite steps that meandered past pristine koi ponds and formal English gardens. In the Jeep, I looked at Bunny’s Bel Air home, really seeing it for the first time. I should have known, a Tea Party house.

A second-floor room filled with light. Bunny, naked to the waist, led me in. Through the window, I saw myself in the Jeep, a corked bottle bobbing on roiling seas. Bunny slipped her arms around me, pressed her breasts

against my naked back. Her silhouette moved behind drawn shades. I'd meant to give her the memory card from my camera.

At the hospital, when I found Abe, he was slipping into his suit jacket. His head was bandaged.

"Georges," he said. "May I trouble you for a ride home?"

"You hungry?"

"Famished," he said.

We drove to Dolores's, the last of the all-night diners in West Los Angeles. The DJ on the radio announced that storms were stacked up off the coast like planes in holding patterns.

I told Abe about the recording of the cop hitting him, told him he could use it as evidence.

"A lawyer with a camcorder in his car," he said with a little laugh.

I laughed too, just as I always did when hearing a lawyer joke, imagining most lawyers did the same to soften the sting of the slur. "That's a good one," I said. "My son's on the track team at his high school. There was a meet yesterday. I left the camera in the car."

"Hey, it's okay, Georges, everybody's got to make a buck," he said.

My voice quavered. "I'm not an ambulance chaser."

"You're all tense," he said. "I'm the one who got beat up tonight."

We made it to Dolores's before the rain became torrential. Kitaru, a short, wiry man, who'd served me late-night meals at Dolores's for years, showed us to a booth upholstered in orange vinyl adjoining a large window framed by gray-and-pink curtains with a ruffled valance. A green cone-shaped pendant lantern hung above each table. Glistening waves of raindrops scrolled across the glass. Shivering, I took off my jacket. Goosebumps covered my arms. I rubbed my hands together and blew on them, trying to get warm.

After Kitaru brought our meal, I said, "Bunny told me about your father. I'm sorry."

I wanted to say something about Jake, that like Abe's father, he'd been killed in his prime by an errant driver. But there was no way to compare

our losses, and it wasn't the right time to talk about the twin cruelties of death: losing those we loved and the passing of our own life.

We ate in silence, and I thought about my father, the man he'd been. Now his memory loss was so great that he couldn't recognize his grandson. He'd already suffered a death of sorts. I thought about the seasons of life, that it was too early a season in Abe's father's life for him to have passed, that Abe's father must have been my age. I wondered what it would be like for Dante if I were to die in middle age. Soon, Dante would be gone, living at college. Rowdy teens breezed into Dolores's, opening the doors to chilled winds and sheets of rain.

I tried to escape the morbid feelings by intellectualizing, remembering Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, Arthur Koestler's *Dialogue with Death*, Sigmund Freud's theories about the nostalgia for death, and Homer's *timé* and *kleos*. What was I doing? Relapsing into philosophical conjecture to ameliorate despair? I knew better, so, wanting to assuage my melancholia, to return to the present, to the safety of what I could see and touch, I said to Abe, "Your accent? Where were you born?"

"Ethiopia," he said, and then after a pause, "There was a pogrom." Fifty-five thousand Ethiopian Jews had been forced from their homes in Gondar, becoming refugees in the deserts of the Sudan where forty thousand of them had perished. As a toddler, he was among the rescued refugees who were brought to Israel. In the absorption shelters in Jerusalem, his mother was diagnosed with promyelocytic leukemia. Bunny and Harold brought the family to Los Angeles. "The chemo prolonged Mother's life. If it hadn't, I never would have known her," he said.

Abe's phone rang, he took the call. While he spoke, I grappled with the contradictions – Bunny the humanitarian, Bunny the advocate of Abolishing Medicare, Bunny the Tea Party fund raiser. The phrase "Abolish Medicare as We Know It" began repeating in my mind like one of those obnoxious Christmas jingles you can't get out of your head, and I realized I'd heard that actual phrase before, somewhere. Using my smart phone, I logged onto the American College of Surgeons website, entered my passcode, and then entered Bunny's name in the search feature.

A page titled "Rachel Siegel, M.D., F.A.C.S" appeared. It listed her college and medical school, the hospitals where she was on staff, and medical books and articles she had authored or co-authored. There was also

a list of her articles in popular magazines. I selected one published about eighteen months earlier: “Abolish Medicare as We Know It.”

Using multi-tiered economic models, the article proposed that the government directly run hospital and clinics for Medicare patients much as it successfully dispensed healthcare to servicemen and women, cutting out health-insurance profit centers. It proposed that the government, like health-insurance companies, negotiate prices with pharmaceutical companies. Bunny also proposed that the government pay medical school tuition and expenses for all medical students. In exchange and to keep their licenses active, doctors would have to work one week without pay every year in Medicare hospitals or clinics, a plan that would be anathema to Ayn Rand, to Rand Paul, to Paul Ryan.

I felt as if the prophet Nathan had revealed my sins and forecast my punishments. How many more nightmares would I have to endure?

Abe pocketed his phone and said to me, “I left the hospital against medical advice.”

He held up his espresso cup and said to Kitaru. “May I have another?”

“I dunno,” Kitaru said. “You driving?”

“I am,” I said.

“All right, then,” Kitaru said, heading for the espresso machine.

“Actually,” Abe said, “I won’t need a ride. That was Bunny. She’s on her way over. The CT scan was negative, but she can’t reach my brother, so she wants me to spend the night at her place.”

Dolores’s was bustling. I heard snippets of conversation about the storm.

“So how are things going with you and Bunny?” Abe said.

“It’s over,” I said.

“Why?”

“She invited me to a Tea Party fund raiser.”

“Not possible,” he said. “She believes that members of political parties are lapdogs. It means she’s crazy about you.”

“Hardly,” I said.

“When they talked politics, Bunny often provoked Harold. Then she’d become intransigent and Harold would say something like, ‘How can a girl with your roots lack empathy?’”

“She doesn’t lack empathy,” I said.

“Harold also said that Bunny made him the happiest man on the planet. When he died, Bunny donated one hundred thousand dollars to the ACLU in his name. They sent her a lifetime-membership card; she sent it back.”

“That’s rich,” I said. “She just gave me a law school-lecture on the first amendment.”

I put my credit card on the check.

“Thanks,” Abe said.

In the parking lot, slogging through a flood, ruining my shoes, I was defenseless against the silver needles of rain. The streets were rapids, the storm drains overwhelmed.

Bunny’s BMW turned into the lot and rolled to a stop beside me.

“It’s raining dogs and cats,” she said. “Get in.”

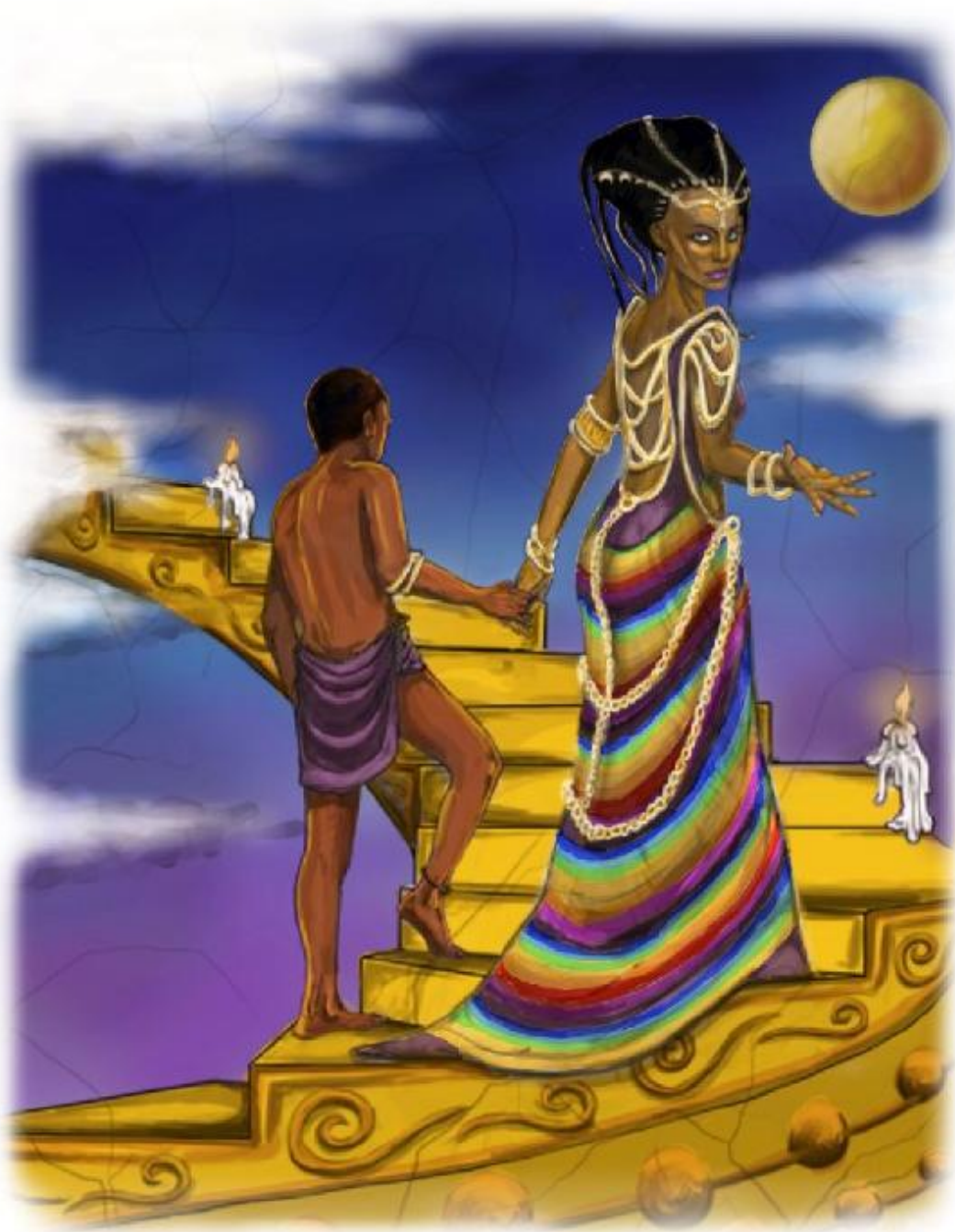
Her car was warm, the leather seats supple and heated. A neon sign on the diner blinked. It said: THE BEST OF YESTERDAY BROUGHT TO YOU TODAY.

“I won’t tolerate intolerance,” she said. “What would you say if the shoe was on the other foot?”

I thought of saying, to forgive is divine. But I couldn’t because within every woman, man, and child the well from which forgiveness springs is sui generis.

Instead I said, “If we were on Noah’s Ark would it matter who had the shoe?”

Part IV Ras



The Lineup

At three o'clock, an afternoon rainstorm precipitates a mudslide, barricading Laurel Canyon where the two-lane road twists back into Ras's view beyond the curve a quarter mile ahead. His Prius is a link in a chain of cars inching up the hillside like a centipede. Abe, his brother and only living relative, riding shotgun, isn't speaking to him, hasn't said a word since they got in the car, hasn't said a word to him for five months.

They're on their way to the police station in Van Nuys where Abe might be able to identify a woman in a lineup who the police believe is the hit-and-run driver who killed their father. And if they're late, the woman – a citizen of France, which has no extradition treaty with the United States – will be released.

The cars preceding theirs come to a standstill. The cars following them stack up like a deck of cards, as if each had been crammed into one of those too-small-compact-car parking spots in an already overcrowded lot. City of Los Angeles Transportation Department workers – wearing yellow rain jackets, floppy hats, and black boots – and motorcycle cops patrol the oncoming lane, keeping it open for the bulldozers, dump trucks, and other road-maintenance vehicles rumbling by.

The windshield wipers beat against the rain – right, left, right, left – one hundred ten sweeps per minute, the rate of his pulse. A Beatles song, "Yesterday," plays softly through the car's tinny speakers. Washed-out green surgical scrubs cover his stately plump physique, his abundant belly alarmingly close to the steering wheel. His face is soft, jowls flapping beneath his chin, while Abe's face is angular, hard, set with the fierce determination that gets him out of bed every morning before dawn for his daily run. A face that says, I'm right, even when it's not.

He'll join a gym after his boards in five weeks. For now it's a matter of priorities; there is so much to do, so many worries, the fission of time inflaming his molten anger.

He came directly from the hospital to Abe's apartment, where he had to wait while Abe showered and shaved and dressed in slacks, a white shirt, a Magen David that hung from a silver chain around his neck, and a tan gabardine trench coat. Lord knows what else he did as he kept Ras waiting

– what was the cliché? cooling his heels? – except that didn’t describe Ras’s pacing back and forth, thinking, can we please get out of here before the rain? And then, as he fumed, the “what else” came to him: obstruction of justice.

The possibility of being late is killing him but it’s a trifling compared to Abe’s refusal to speak to him. Ordinarily he savors silence, but now, having to tolerate it, he suffers. During the past five months he’s read Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, the Torah and the Talmud, hoping to find wisdom to help him come to terms with his dispute with Abe. He’s found nothing that would cause him to question his belief that justice is each man and each woman fulfilling G-d’s intentions for them. It would have been unjust had Einstein abandoned physics or if Beethoven, or the Beatles for that matter, had abandoned music. G-d’s purpose for Abe is for him to become a doctor.

Yet despite his study and prayer, despite his scoffing at cynics who described justice as a one-word oxymoron, despite his dead certainty about what justice really is, an uncertainty he doesn’t understand causes him to ask himself repeatedly, can anyone really know G-d’s purpose for them? But of course, the truly devout can know because the mind is G-d’s creation for the reception of His wisdom, the ultimate answer to the question: What is real? This was proven by Descartes some four hundred years ago, and no philosopher has disproved it since.

If Abe can identify the hit-and-run driver, then maybe closure will enable him to receive G-d’s intentions: return to medical school and finish the two semesters that remain. This would serve justice – not revenge, though that would be sweet. Justice is what this trip to the lineup is about. And if they’re late, this justice – Abe becoming a doctor – may be denied.

A transportation worker taps their windshield. The car in front of theirs swings into the open lane, heading back to Los Angeles, and then it’s their turn.

“We won’t make it,” he says, maneuvering in the tangle of vehicles trying to turn around.

“What are you worked up about?” Abe says, surprising him. “You’re not the one who’ll have to look at that woman and remember Father mangled, bleeding, dead.”

Ras’s myopia is acute, but his peripheral vision is good enough for him to see Abe looking at him now, the question on his face as twisted as the

tone of his voice. So what is the point of this interrogation? Whatever it is, this isn't the time to start another argument. In his gut, he's thankful Abe has spoken to him, and he knows he should just play along good naturedly, take this circuitous path that might break them out of their own gridlock, and find out what's on his brother's mind. But he's not a subtle man; he knows this. It's a limitation, a fault, something he has to live with, to be aware of, to work on all the time. But there are few things he hates more than playing head games.

"She'll get away with genocide," Ras says.

Abe says, "Will there be a war-crime trial?"

Ras turns off the CD player. "I don't have to be Father to know about genocide."

"Okay, let's talk about the Armenians and the Turks."

What is Abe really asking? Is he asking about the denial of the Armenian genocide by the Turkish government? Is Abe asking a larger question about history? If events are denied, do they become less real? Unreal? If genocide is forgotten, did it occur?

Or is the question straight forward? Does Abe just want to know if Ras knows about the World War I era relocation of the Armenians, more than a million killed, their property stolen. It was no different from the pogrom of his people, the Jews of Ethiopia, their slaughter in The Sudan, their homes in Gondar given to the ones who drove them out. It had happened in Rwanda, in Darfur, in Sri Lanka, in The Congo.

Is Abe asking about the importance of preserving the truths about genocide, the importance of Holocaust museums? Despite the evidence in those museums of World War II of the wholesale attempts to eradicate peoples and cultures, more than a billion people – among them white supremacists, radical Muslims, other anti-Semites – deny that there had been a World War II slaughter of Jews and other people and their cultures. Is Abe asking about the more than one billion people who do not believe that there had been a September 11, 2001 attack on the New York City World Trade Center by radical Islamists? Or who believe that the attack was launched by Israel or the United States?

Would an example of understanding genocide be found in the memoirs of the Confederate Lost Cause writers who ardently denied that the South's attempted secession was about preserving slavery? Were the *Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* sufficiently persuasive, as Grant hoped they would be, to

preserve the truth: the southern oligarchy was willing sacrifice hundreds of thousands of their young men to preserve slavery to protect their wealth created by stolen labor, stolen lives?

Plato had said that war is about getting money. Because Plato knew nothing of genocide, he was only partially correct. Ras had come to understand that war is about theft: stealing and defending wealth. Eradicating other races to enable plundering of their property is just one means of accomplishing the theft.

Ras is impatient with these contemplations, as if his own mental wanderings – The World War II Holocaust, 9/11, Armenians, U.S. Grant, slaves and slavers – will make them late, so his mouth runs over his mind's attempt to mediate his thoughts and he hears himself say, "What do the Turks and Armenians have to do with being late?"

"What's the point of talking?" Abe says, folding his arms, turning away from Ras, looking out the passenger-door window at the rain pelting the hillside.

The cars that had been behind them start turning, trying to jump the queue, traffic moves with the alacrity of a glacier. Save for the sound of the windshield wipers swishing right, left, right, left, and the soft hum of the electric motor, there is only silence.

Ninety minutes earlier, Ras was sitting in a conference room in the hospital's oncology ward. Across from him on the other side of the too-large-for-the room, knotty-pine table sat Mrs. and Mr. Angelico. Ras was wedged between the table and the wall, as if sandwiched into a coffin.

Mrs. Angelico clenched crushed tissues, her arm encircling her husband's shoulders, her face composed. Mr. Angelico, larger than Ras, was unshaven. Purple bags bulged beneath his eyes. He held his nose with his own tissues as if to stanch a dammed flood of mucus if the prognosis were bad. The prognosis was worse than bad.

The voice of a nurse over the intercom: "Dr. Demeke? Dr. Percival on the line."

Ras said, "Ben, please tell him—"

Then Percival's voice boomed, "Ras, Damn it. Where are the test results for Mrs. Lee?"

"Excuse me," Ras said, picking up the phone, his soft voice a counterpoint to Percival's bombast. "I'm meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Angelico."

Percival greeted this news with silence. Ras pictured Percival's sardonic grimace, imagined his blood pressure rising. Why hadn't he just said he was with patients?

Mrs. Angelico was a homemaker, caring for the family's five children. Mr. Angelico was a financial-services worker who'd been laid off when his job had been shipped overseas. His health insurance and savings had run out months before. During an acrimonious meeting, Ras had persuaded Percival that the Angelico case had research value. When the latest treatment wasn't working, Percival had said, "This isn't a charity hospital." Percival had told Ras to transfer the Angelico case to County Hospital. Ras hadn't.

After a brief pause, Percival said, "Give them my best wishes. Now about Mrs. Lee—"

"Mrs. Lee is Dr. Maxwell's patient."

"That so?" Percival said. Over the phone came the sound of papers rustling. Mrs. Angelico removed her arm from her husband's shoulder, twisted, then shredded the tissue. Mr. Angelico wiped his nose with his sleeve. Then he got up from his chair, faced the wall, and tapped his forehead against it.

When Percival came back on the line he said, "Find Maxwell!" Then he hung up.

A half hour later, Ras held open the conference-room door. The fluorescent lights illuminated the red-silk scarf covering Mrs. Angelico's head now bald from the effects of chemotherapy that no longer worked. Her weight had dipped to ninety pounds. She helped her husband from the room.

Ras walked to the nurse's station where Ben was preparing meds. By habit, Ras compared what was on the medication tray with the orders he'd written. The dosage for Mrs. Rigby, awaiting chemotherapy, was wrong. His cell rang. The caller ID said: GEORGES BOHEM.

Bunny had introduced her boyfriend, Georges, to Abe just one month after Father had been killed. At that time, the LAPD had come up with nothing in its supposed investigation of the hit and run. Georges had friends who had influence with high-ranking officers in the police department. And, according to Bunny, despite their age differences, Georges and his son, Dante, had become friends with Abe. Now Georges, who wouldn't accept any fee, was his and Abe's attorney.

Ras answered his cell. “Georges? Can you hold for a sec?”

Georges said, “The woman they think—”

Ras said, “Ben, that’s four *point* four IUs, not forty-four.”

“Ras?” Georges said.

“Hey, Georges, can I call you back?”

“A suspect in the hit and run has been apprehended,” Georges said.

Silence – like in the moment before a guillotine drops – hung in the air. Then what Georges said next isolated Ras from his thoughts of Mrs. Rigby, the dosages of her medications, and everything else. Detective Bellow, a homicide detective assigned to the case the day after Georges became their lawyer, had brought a suspect to the police station in Van Nuys for a lineup. He didn’t have probable cause to make an arrest without Abe identifying her, and without an arrest, he couldn’t lawfully detain her beyond five o’clock. Detective Bellow had offered to send a car for Abe, but Abe wanted Ras to bring him.

Ras said, “Where’s he living?”

“My God,” Georges said. “You two still not talking? With Bunny on your case, I thought there would be a rapprochement by now. Have you and Abe talked to your Rabbi?”

“Appreciate the concern, Georges. We’ve been down that road with Bunny. Abe is intransigent.”

“There’s no middle ground?” Georges said.

“What I’ve asked for is a middle ground. It’s exactly what Father would have wanted.”

Georges gave Ras Abe’s address and then said, “Detective Bellow says, if they have to let her go, she’s out of the state, if not the country, by morning.”

Ras said, “We’ll be there before five.”

“Joost will meet you at the station,” Georges said. “Call me after the lineup, okay?”

At three-thirty, through unremitting rain, Ras and Abe begin their descent on Coldwater Canyon into the San Fernando Valley.

Ras’s cell rings. The caller ID says, JOOST.

Ras answers and says, “Tell the sergeant, forty minutes tops.”

Joost says, “My car stalled. I’m at a gas station on Laurel and Ventura. I’ll take a cab.”

“Bummer,” Ras says. “You won’t get one in this weather. We’ll pick you up afterward.”

“He’s not there?” Abe says.

“Car broke down.”

“Pick him up.”

“Oh, Lord,” Ras says. “It’s in the other direction.”

“Let me out. Here,” Abe says.

Ordinarily, driving in the rain in Los Angeles is never promising. Now, like Laurel Canyon an hour earlier, Ventura Boulevard is as crowded as St. Peter’s Square during Easter Mass. It’s ten minutes after four o’clock when Ras and Abe pull into the service station on Laurel. Joost, standing four-foot-eight, a foot-and-a-half shorter than Ras, wears a tweed sport coat with patches on the elbows and looks professorial under his plaid umbrella.

When he gets into the Prius, he says, “You two talking yet?”

Ras says, No. Abe says, Yes.

“Never a dull moment in the Demeke family,” Joost says.

“You have dull moments in your family?” Ras says.

The Prius skids on wet pavement as Ras pulls out onto Laurel, heading north.

Joost says, “You talking or not?”

“Abe was playing a game,” Ras says, “if you want to call that talking.”

“What game?” Joost says.

“Genocide,” Ras says.

“Ras lost,” Abe says.

“Not true. I quit.”

“Because you didn’t know the answer.”

“Ask me,” Joost says. “I bet I know.”

“Oh, Lord,” Ras says. “Where do I turn?”

“Three more lights, then take a left,” Joost says.

Cracks of thunder punctuate a deluge that would have floated Noah’s ark.

“In this traffic,” Ras says, “that could take an hour.”

Abe says, “Ras doesn’t know about the Armenian genocide.”

The guy in the SUV behind them is leaning on his horn. The woman in the station wagon in front of them is screaming at raucous tots.

“Of course, I do,” Ras says.

“Okay then,” Abe says, “answer this. Is Canada guilty of ongoing genocide?”

“Nope,” Ras says. “No way.”

“ZZZZTT!” Joost says.

It’s 4:15, a fifteen-minute drive to the police station in normal traffic. But in this rain-induced gridlock, they’re not going to make it.

Abe continues. “Fifty thousand aboriginal children were killed while living in Residential School complexes between 1895 and 1984—”

Abe’s cell rings. “It’s Detective Bellow,” he says, handing the phone to Joost.

Forks of lightning streak across the darkening sky.

Sirens sound in the distance.

Ras says, “Canada? Really?”

Police motorcycles, emergency lights flashing, pull into the intersection. Cops begin clearing it. One of the cops pulls his motorcycle in front of the Prius, blocking it. Others direct cars, trucks, and buses to the curb. An LAPD squad car – siren shrieking – speeds toward them down the cleared lanes on Laurel.

Detective Bellow, the collar of his raincoat turned up, taps on Ras’s window.

“Dr. Demeke,” the detective says, nodding to Ras, “we’ll see you at the station.”

Abe doesn’t move. “Aren’t you going to ask me what the point is?”

Ras says, “You have less than thirty minutes. Let’s talk about this later.”

“In the 1950s,” Abe says, “the Canadian government forcibly relocated twenty-three Ungava Inuit families from their home on the eastern shore of the Hudson Bay to Ellesmere Island in the east Arctic Archipelago, so Canada could claim sovereignty over that strategic area. The Inuits can’t survive there. They’re dying.”

“I get it,” Ras says. “You don’t think that what that hit-and-run driver who killed Father did compares to what happened to the Armenians and the Ungava Inuits. You’re right.”

“That’s not the point,” Abe says. “As a doctor, what could I do for the Inuits?”

Joost says to Abe, “C’mon, bro.”

Abe gets out of the Prius.

Joost asks if they’ll make it on time. The detective shrugs.

Police motorcycles roar ahead as the squad car takes off up the cleared lanes, turns on Vanowen and, with the Doppler effect of the sound of the sirens fading, Abe's police escort disappears.

At 5:30, Ras pulls the Prius up to the curb in front of the police station on Sylmar Avenue. He turns off the engine, leans back in his seat, and closes his eyes.

The wipers sweep back and forth. He hears his heartbeat over the pounding rain. If he went to Ellesmere Island to help the Inuits, who would help Mrs. Angelico? There's a literary term for weather like this, but he can't remember it. Abe would know. But he does remember the foreboding weather on the day he and Abe last spoke five months before.

Waiting for the Sun

Ras stood beside Teresa, his large, soft hand resting on her forearm: waxy skin, edematous fluid, and not much more, covering her ulna and radius. There was still life in her eyes, which moved from him to the table holding the vestiges of the extreme unction – pyx, burse, candles – to her priest, husband, and two young sons. It was a few hours after midnight, Saturday morning well before dawn. The Sabbath.

“*Dominus Vobiscum*,” the priest said. “Let us pray. Our Father . . .”

The voices of Teresa’s family joined in. “. . . who art in heaven . . .”

And then Ras added his voice to theirs. “. . . Hallowed be thy name.”

Teresa traced her bony fingers across the palm of his warm pudgy hand. Her fingertips cool, her neck mottled, her lips blue and in that moment between her life and her death he envisioned her brown face becoming his mother’s black face.

Later he would note on her death certificate: Saturday morning, 3 a.m. But it could have been two and it could have been four. It was that kind of night.

He was twelve when his mother died. She’d told him he belonged to the Tribe of Dan, the lost tribe of Israel, the tribe lost to Africa, the tribe lost to all other Jewish people for thousands of years. She’d also said, “Ras, your name means ‘prince’ in Amharic,” the Ethiopian language of his childhood dreams. When he was six, his brother, Abebe, was born, and his mother had said, “His name means ‘blooming like a flower’.” After she died, she often came back to Ras in his dreams saying, always in Amharic, “You will be doctors, caring for our people in the Promised Land.”

But what good could come of thinking of her now? He had too little time and a medical mystery to solve. Teresa had succumbed to the same disease that had killed his mother. Or had she? Dr. Percival, the hospital’s chief oncologist, was certain the autopsy would show cancer in Teresa’s brain, and before that report came in he wanted to know how they had failed to diagnose it. To put it mildly, Percival was impatient. His recommendation would be vital to Ras when he finished his residency. And Percival wanted answers by Monday morning.

Before first light, Ras took the stairs to his third-floor Silver Lake apartment. He made coffee and slipped a CD – Mozart’s *Requiem* – into the player. Even though music was strictly forbidden, and all other Judaic laws were followed – they remained at home for a week, mirrors were covered, they sat only on low stools – his father had played the *Requiem* when they sat shiva for his mother. And he and Abe had played the *Requiem* when sitting shiva for Father just one month before.

Ras listened to the music and examined radiology and lab reports while rolling a highlighter back and forth, over and under the fingers of one hand – his body, like his mind, always in motion.

He faced the sliding-glass doors in the living room and held up a CT scan of Teresa’s head taken just a week before. The sun was already disappearing behind gathering rain clouds, so the light of dawn was unusually dim. But it was bright enough to see the film, and there was no cancer to be seen. He put the film down, put his glasses on the table, and rubbed sleep from his eyes. If it had gotten into her brain, where was it?

A quartet sang *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*.

Why were the truly devout servants of the Lord, like Teresa, like his mother, taken from this world when their children were so young? He prayed for the faith of Job, but in anger, he threw the highlighter across the room, leaving a yellow mark on the wall near blue and white candles, a gold Kiddush cup, and a shofar arranged on a buffet like ornaments on an altar. A tattered briefcase embossed with the flag of the Republic of South Africa, belonging to Joost, lay near the buffet. Joost, his best friend, was visiting for a week while interviewing at UCLA for a tenure-track position in the sociology department.

Ras tried again to focus on his work and again he was distracted, this time by the sight of Abe’s keys on the kitchen counter. Abe had been agitated when he’d called— what time had it been? Midnight? Ras had been too busy to talk and hadn’t called back as he’d promised. Perhaps Joost had taken Abe to task for dropping out of medical school. He’d have to wait until Abe woke up to find out.

He walked down the hall toward his bedroom. The door to Abe’s room was open and his bed was made. He phoned Abe. There was no answer.

Abe’s car was in the garage. He’d left his keys. It was too early to call any of his friends. If Ras could clear his mind of worry, maybe he’d be able

to see the genesis of cancer in Teresa's brain. But he couldn't.

He opened the sliding-glass doors, stepped onto the balcony. Trompe l'oeil roses and violets bordered an Echo Park mural. Like a hearse, a truck lugubriously rolled by through the mist. Wind in the branches of nearby ficus and schefflera carried the susurrus of their leaves. The odor of mulch mixed with manure filled the air. He felt a drizzle but remained on the balcony, awaiting inspiration and his brother. Rain fell before either arrived.

Turning from his park view, he tripped over the track of the sliding-glass-door and grabbed the neck of a floor lamp. But his forward momentum jerked the plug from the socket, and he hit the floor, shattering the lamp's stained-glass shade. Lying in the shards, he thought of his mother and listened to woodwinds.

Joost rushed into the room. "You all right?" His accent was Afrikaans, his curls were strawberry-blond, his T-shirt said JESUS FOR JEWS.

Brushing glass off his scrubs, Ras ignored him and in concert with the sorrowful song he silently recited the *Kaddish*.

When he turned around, Joost—his tooth-white skin contrasting with Ras's black-coffee complexion—was organizing the chaos on the table.

"Stop!" Ras said, and he rifled through the newly arranged files, recreating the appearance of disorder.

Brandishing one of the files, he said, "These are Teresa's." He shook his finger at the table as if the data were at fault. "She didn't make it."

Joost lowered his head. "It was G-d's will," he said.

Indeed, it was.

Ras vacuumed the fragmented glass and carried the broken lamp out to the trash. When he returned, he found Joost in the living room reading *Up from Oppression*. This was Father's most important book.

On the back of the dust jacket an image of Auschwitz was superimposed over a picture of his father, pipe clenched in his mouth. Gaunt men wore tattered clothing with Stars of David sewn on their shirts. Wisps of smoke from his father's pipe mingled with the smoke rising from the crematorium chimneys, giving the image the appearance of a painting by Magritte.

Joost said, "An extraordinary portrayal of the genocide of our people."

Our people—their heritage portrayed in antique tapestries hanging on the wall. The ancient weavings were embroidered with biblical scenes and Hebrew words telling stories of King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, the

Tower of Babel, the Diaspora of the Jews, and a black baby Moses adrift in a straw basket on the Nile, discovered by an Egyptian princess and her servants.

Ras said. "When's the last time you saw Abe?"

"Yesterday afternoon." Joost marked a place in the book. "He took me to his writing workshop to hear his class discuss his play."

"How'd it go?"

"The professor said it was confusing."

"Was it?"

Joost poured himself a cup of coffee and sat cross-legged on the floor. "Not to me."

"Did something happen between you two? A fight?"

"No," Joost said, peering at Ras through steam rising from his coffee mug. "Why?"

He didn't want to talk about what Abe had said, but now how could he avoid it? While he found comfort in the disorder of Teresa's charts, there was too much disorder elsewhere. Now he'd involved himself in some difficulty between Abe and Joost. What he should have done was kept his mouth shut. But he hadn't, and whose fault was that? Knowing Joost as he did, he knew he'd not be able to drop the subject. "He called me at work last night," Ras said.

"And?"

"He wasn't himself. He said, 'Joost is a Judas.' He said—" A crash of thunder rattled the sliding-glass doors, the panes pelted by relentless rain, a hard rain getting harder, the sky darkening like a bruise. And Abe was out there. "Something was wrong."

"Obviously," Joost said.

"Then I got a text telling me Teresa had had a stroke. Abe said it was a long story and could wait. Afterward, work got even more hectic. It was a nightmare shift. Before I knew it four hours had passed, and I was pronouncing Teresa dead." Ras paused. "He didn't come home last night."

"I'll call him." Joost punched numbers into his cell. "Voice mail," he said. "Hey, Abe, what's goin' on, bro? Call me." He turned his palms upward as if to say, what now?

"Did you tell him to go back to med school?"

"Of course not," Joost said.

Ras watched a couple huddled under an umbrella, walking together, fighting the wind.

Eventually he said, "Well, what happened?"

"We had lunch. We went to his class. On the way home, we talked about your father."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Still no leads on the hit-and-run driver." Joost said quietly. "Are you sure you heard him right?"

Ras didn't answer, remembering the morning when he'd been awakened by a call from Abe, who was in an ambulance with Father. He felt lightheaded and had to hold on to the back of the sofa to steady himself while he eased his bulk into the welcoming recess of its seat.

"We'll have to wait for Abe to sort this out," he said.

An hour later, Joost was writing. Against the gray light his face glowed like a harvest moon. *Heavenly Eyes*, a book, lay on the table next to a stack of notes.

Ras picked it up. "What are you working on?"

"A lecture," Joost said.

"But this isn't sociology. It's about *The Great Gatsby*."

"I'm using novels to show how the perspectives of different social strata in their time preserve the status quo by disenfranchising women and minorities—"

"Novels?"

"Right. You see, Fitzgerald's character, Tom Buchanan—"

There was a pop and the power went out. "Where are the flashlights?" Joost said.

"I'll get them," Ras said. But he didn't move. In the dark, he saw himself by his mother's deathbed. She smiled but was too weak to move. He put his face close to hers and as he inhaled, she exhaled, her last breath cool on his lips and nostrils, her eyes, open but unmoving, unseeing.

He remembered her teaching him to tumble. "Tuck in your chin," she said. His chin dropped to his chest, his arms relaxed.

"Hey, bro," Joost said.

Ras opened his eyes. The lights were back on. He stood and stretched, running one hand over the other as if removing an invisible pair of gloves. A lightning flash filled the sky, illuminating the mural in the park. On the

left side of the mural an urban landscape of office buildings, factories, and crowded neighborhoods nestled in a web of freeways. On the right side, farmers planted terraces on the outskirts of a Maya village. In the center, a procession of people of all races ascended a glittering spiral staircase. They were led by a tall, regal woman with ebony skin. She wore brightly striped Ethiopian robes and the headdress of a queen – the Queen of Sheba. She held the hand of an African boy – her son, a prince, he imagined, no older than twelve. He felt her other hand reaching out to him. Then, as if summoned, he opened the sliding-glass door, stepped onto the balcony and into a torrent of rain.

“Are you nuts?” Joost yelled. Ras, soaked, floundered back into the living room, and Joost laughed as he pushed the door closed behind him. “You look like a drowned panda.”

“I’ll change,” Ras said. He lumbered down a long hallway to his bedroom, stripped off his wet scrubs and lay on his bed. He fell asleep dreaming of children climbing over corpses, searching for their parents, unable to find them.

A few hours later he awoke to the sound of staccato pings on his bedroom windows, raindrops scrolling down the panes, refracting prisms of light. He showered, pulled on sweats, got coffee, then wandered into the living room, where Joost was reading *Heavenly Eyes*.

“Look,” Joost said, holding the book open to a picture of the original *Gatsby* dust jacket: the outline of a woman’s face – drawn against the deep-blue background of a bay reflecting stars at night – floated above an enormous fireworks display. Her face, aside from her pursed red lips and penetrating yellow eyes, was invisible. An isolated green teardrop trickled from her right eye down a transparent cheek, rippling across the water like light at the end of illusion. “See the reclining nudes in her irises?”

Ras peered at the picture. “No,” he said. “Have you heard from Abe?”

“Not yet.”

“Something’s happened; that’s why he hasn’t called.”

“He needs space. You’ve got to stop pressuring him about medical school.”

“Medicine is his life. This writing thing, it’s just an escape,” Ras said. “Don’t you see? He’s become lost dealing with his grief.”

Joost closed his book. “He’s not going back to med school.”

Ras sipped his coffee. “He’ll go back, or I won’t support him. I’ll kick him out.”

Joost said, “Oh, please.” His forehead scrunched, and the faint lines of crow’s feet danced at the corners of his eyes. “He doesn’t need your money.”

Or so Joost thought. And Abe? That’s probably what he thought too. Money was fueling this crisis. For each of his sons Father had purchased a two-million-dollar life-insurance policy with double-indemnity. He and Abe would each receive four million dollars. But Father had been wise, and if Abe dropped out of medical school thinking he didn’t need to earn a living, then Ras would have to do exactly what Father would have done to ensure that didn’t happen.

Ras had just finished talking to Dr. Percival, admitting he still hadn’t discovered how the cancer could have gotten into Teresa’s brain, when the intercom chimed. He hurried to the security panel and pressed the speaker button. “Abe? Is that you?”

Abe answered, “I lost my keys.”

Ras pressed the entrance buzzer, then squeezed his eyes shut, trying to relieve the ache hammering the sides of his head.

There was an impatient knock on the door, and he opened it. Abe touched the mezuzah with his fore and middle fingers and kissed them. He was holding bandages, dripping rainwater, his forehead bleeding. He stumbled into the apartment, tracking blood on the carpet. He dropped his backpack in the kitchen, pulled off his suit jacket and tie. His shoulders hunched forward.

Ras washed his hands, slipped on latex gloves and cleaned Abe’s wounds. He put ice in a towel and said, “Hold this against your head. What happened?”

“A cop hit me,” Abe said.

“Oh Lord,” Ras said.

“Where did you spend the night?” Joost said.

Abe stared at Joost with undisguised hostility.

“Well?” Ras said. “Are you going to tell us.”

“At Bunny’s.”

“Brother, I don’t understand. Why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t Bunny call?” Ras said.

“She called you,” Abe said.

Ras’s cell phone was on the table where he and Joost had been working. Joost picked up the phone. “Three voice mail messages from Bunny, two from Abe, some others, numbers I don’t recognize.”

“Oh, Lord,” Ras said. “I didn’t check my phone?”

Joost said, “You both had tough nights.”

“Bunny let you leave her house like this?” Ras said.

“I left before she woke up, called a cab.”

“You need stitches. C’mon. We’re going to the E.R.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Abe said. “It’s the Sabbath.”

“Oh, Lord,” Ras said in a tremulous voice. He gave Abe a preliminary neurological exam: Did you lose consciousness? Blurry vision? Tinnitus? What day is today?

“I just told you. It’s the Sabbath. Lay off,” Abe said.

Ras took his medical kit out of a cupboard.

“I couldn’t let them get away with it,” Abe said.

“Them?” Joost said. “How many cops were there?”

“Three hippies. They were tearing up the flowerbeds.”

“What flowerbeds?” Ras said.

“You know— the ones in front of the church.”

“What church?” Ras said.

“The church! The one across from the *schul*. I yelled at them to stop; they called me Nigger.”

Abe was standing now, hands clenched.

“It’s okay,” Ras said, his large hand on his brother’s shoulder, easing him back into his chair.

Ras said, “I’ve applied a topical anesthetic, but this will still sting.” As he sutured, he missed a stitch, then another, each time muttering, “Shit.” Then he tried again, repeating the pattern – a missed stitch followed by an expletive.

Abe remained stoic, but Joost interjected, “Watch out!” and “Careful!” time and again. When Ras finished, Joost said, “When you see the scar, you’ll wish he’d taken you to the E.R.”

Abe glared at Joost. Joost started to speak, but Ras cut him off with a gesture.

“I met this lawyer, Bunny’s new boyfriend. He may be able to help us find that woman, the one who killed Father.”

Ras said, "Take a shower and go to bed. We'll talk about the lawyer later."

"I'm not tired!"

Ras handed Abe a pill. "Humor me."

In the late afternoon there was a lull in the storm. Ras was reviewing leukemia studies and Joost was writing about *Gatsby* and class discrimination when Abe walked in.

"What's wrong with you," Joost said, "calling me a Judas?"

"Before class you said my play was great. Afterward you told me to revise it. Either you were insincere beforehand, or you're a jellyfish."

"This is about your play? That's why you're angry?" Joost said.

"Who says I'm angry?"

"Hey, Ras," Joost said, "give us a few minutes, okay?"

Ras stepped onto the balcony with a mug of coffee. A rainbow spanned a tangerine sky.

Seventeen years earlier, Ras, Abe and their parents were rescued from The Sudan and taken to the absorption shelters in Jerusalem for Jewish Ethiopian refugees. But their stay was brief. Harold and Bunny brought the family to Los Angeles so that Mother could receive experimental chemotherapy. Ras and Joost met two years later, the year Mother died, and the two had become fast – though in the eyes of many, unlikely – friends: the tall, gangly, black Ras with his broken English and the diminutive white Joost with his funny Afrikaans accent.

Years later, Ras had spent a day in the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C., where he saw exhibits of Nazi medical experiments. One of the displays featured photographs of a dwarf who'd been a university professor. In the first photograph, the man was alive, wearing a tweed coat, holding a pipe, looking professorial. The next photograph was the man's nude corpse. Subsequent photographs showed the man's body in various states of dissection. The final photographs showed several views of his skeleton. It was then Ras understood that his bonds with Joost were formed by something deeper than just their boyhood-outcast status and Judaism.

Ras drummed his fingers on the balcony railing. Twenty, maybe thirty minutes had passed and Joost and Abe were still talking. Ras headed into

the kitchen determined to focus only on what had killed Teresa, but he couldn't help overhearing Abe and Joost.

"When your professor said your premise was convoluted, I saw the problem," Joost said. "I know your story because I know you. He doesn't even know you're Jewish. That's why he doesn't believe there are black Jews. He can't see your characters, but it's not his fault. You have to bring the audience into the world where your characters live. When you do that, they'll be believable."

"You're not saying I should chuck it?"

"*Au contraire, mon frère.* I see it on Broadway."

When Ras brought his coffee into the dining room, Abe was alone, studying Teresa's charts.

"What's going on?" Abe said, holding up a stack of lab reports. "You can't take patient charts out of the hospital."

"Teresa died last night."

"Oh, G-d. What happened?"

"Hemorrhagic stroke. There must have been an astrocytoma in her brain. Percival told me to bring the charts home and figure out why we didn't see it," Ras said, his voice faltering.

Abe sorted through the charts. "This lumbar puncture shows elevated proteins. Where's the cerebral spinal fluid test?"

Ras rubbed an eye, dislodging a contact lens. "The proteins were nonspecific: no infection or vascular irregularity in the spinal cord." He held his forefinger on his closed eyelid and rotated his eyeball until the lens readjusted. "They were normal in subsequent LPs. We had no reason to evaluate CSF."

Abe turned to the first page of a chart. "She had blurry vision on admission."

Ras pointed to a notation. "Intermittently and only in her right eye."

"That's important: only in one eye," Abe said.

"We changed her pain meds; afterward her vision was perfect," Ras said.

"Did you order a Visual Field Test? Call in an ophthalmologist?"

Ras shook his head. "To treat a non-recurring insignificant symptom?"

"Here's a CT scan of her head," Abe said, tossing it aside. "Nothing will be visible on that. Where's the MRA?"

"I'm telling you, for four months her vision was okay."

“So— there’s no M R Angiography,” Abe said, enunciating each syllable as if his mind were only one step ahead of his voice. “That’s why you didn’t anticipate vascular abnormality in the occipital cortex. That’s where the leukemia infiltrated. The tumor impinged the optic nerve of her right eye—”

“Or affected its blood supply,” Ras said.

“The tumor eroded—”

“Into her blood vessels.” Ras exhaled slowly and audibly. “A blood vessel rupture triggered the stroke.” His eyes teared again. “She needed intrathecal chemo. Why didn’t I see it?” His hand trembled, splattering coffee on the table and floor. “When I write it up, it’ll be an admission of malpractice,” he said, taking no notice of the spill.

Abe fetched a towel from the kitchen. When he returned Ras was jotting notes.

“Chemo in her brain might have killed her,” Abe said, wiping up the puddles of coffee.

“Possibly, but—”

“You’re the senior resident. Percival was her oncologist. Why are you blaming yourself?”

Ras said, “Percival didn’t see what was happening to Teresa. You did.”

“All you talk about is Teresa. Why won’t you talk about Father?”

“I’m not following,” Ras said.

“I can’t get it out of my mind—” He stood with his back to Ras and said, “I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t tell the paramedics what happened. I couldn’t even talk. It wasn’t like looking at a trauma victim in the E.R. He was . . .”

Ras said, “There wasn’t anything you could have done.” He put his arm around Abe.

“I just thought about getting Father’s blessing,” Abe said.

“For what?”

“If I couldn’t even help Father, what kind of a doctor could I be?”

“Father died instantaneously,” Ras said. “It’s black and white. Not like Teresa’s case.”

“I talk about Father; you talk about Teresa. Why should I listen to you?”

Ras considered the question. “Want to go for a walk?”

Abe said, “Get your raincoat.”

The sidewalks were slick; the rainbow had faded into a livid sky. The brothers walked in silence until Ras said, "I know what Father would have told you. I can't say it as well. He would have reminded you of our surviving The Sudan. I saw my best friend die of malnutrition, his arms skinnier than pencils. I saw our cousin raped – she was twelve – her father castrated. We were starving when the Israelis found us."

Abe said, "I've heard these stories. What's your point?"

What exactly was his point? There were so many points. So many things to keep track of. So many things to worry about. If he let himself go for one second, if he lowered his vigilance, relaxed his guard, all would be lost. He'd learned that in The Sudan. He'd learned it when he lost his parents. He'd learned it as an oncologist.

A pair of hummingbirds hovered in the cold, moist air near red bottlebrush, bobbing and weaving like boxers. Two squirrels dashed through puddles and scampered across the street. A taxi driver slammed on his brakes, narrowly missing them. Survivors.

"I'm not saying Father wouldn't have given you his blessing to become a writer," Ras said. "But he would have been able to show you the wisdom of becoming a doctor first. You've wandered off track; you're lost. Father would have helped you find your way back. He always said there was a reason we were rescued while others perished. You survived because G-d chose *you* to be a healer."

"Who are we healing? Teresa? Father?"

"You have a calling."

"You hear my calling?" Abe said.

"Mother would have told you what I'm telling you."

"When I hear Mother's voice," Abe said, "that's not what I hear."

"Oh, Lord."

"You didn't see what I saw," Abe said. "I'm not going to be in the death business. I can't even watch hippies kill flowers."

"When Father purchased life insurance, he placed it in trusts. When I graduated from medical school, he dissolved my trust and made me a direct beneficiary. And then he also made me the successor trustee, after himself, of your trust. When you graduated from med school, Father would have dissolved your trust too. So you see, you're my responsibility now."

Abe stopped walking, turned to face his brother.

“If you don't become a doctor, you won't see a penny of the life insurance until you're thirty-five,” Ras said. It began to drizzle. “You have only two semesters left. Get your degree. Then if you don't want to practice medicine, you don't have to.”

Abe turned his back on Ras and headed home.

Ras crossed the street and walked through the park. As he neared the mural, he could no longer distinguish the Ethiopian queen from his mother, and he had a sensation of floating with her up the glittering staircase.

The rain became more insistent. He saw an old man lying on a bus-stop bench. His legs skinny, his feet bare, his arms flecked with scale, his face pocked with suppurating ulcers. On the bench back was an ad. It said: CITIBANK. LIVE RICHLY.

By the time Ras got home, the cloudburst had become a downpour. He changed into dry clothes, and when he came back into the dining room Abe was talking to Joost. A suitcase lay on the floor beneath the antique tapestries.

“Where are you going?” Ras demanded.

Abe slipped into a raincoat, put on his backpack, picked up his car keys and the suitcase. “I can't be something I'm not,” he said. “Not for you. Not for anyone.”

“Please don't go out into the storm again, okay? Let's talk about this later.”

“Nothing will change,” Abe said, and he walked out, leaving the door open behind him.

“What's wrong with you?” Joost said. “Don't let him go.”

“He's right. I'm not going to change my mind.”

“Read this,” Joost said. “Pages from the novel he's writing.”

“Oh, Lord! A novel? What novel? I thought he was writing a play.”

“He's working on both. He's a writer now.”

“Why should I read it?”

“Your father would have read this!”

“Under these circumstances, he would have refused.”

“Your father would not have let you disown your brother.”

Ras turned away from Joost.

“If you don't read this, you'll disown me too.”

“*Et tu, Brute?*” Ras said. He took the pages and read.

In the early morning of the third day after our escape from the rebel militia near Al Qadjäriif, Mother collapsed. Father built a shelter in a grove of acacia trees, but there wasn't enough shade to shield her from the sun. By midmorning, she was delirious. When I offered her goat's milk, Father admonished me.

"We can't let Mother die," I said.

"We'll need that food for the trek to Sannär," he said.

"There are no Israelis in Sannär! Or anywhere! There is no Canaan!" I said.

My aunt said, "Shame on you, Brother. Addis, listen to G-d. He will provide."

"THERE IS NO G-D," I screamed.

Father and my aunt left me alone with Mother.

Mother drank a small portion of milk. By noon the sky was a cloudless furnace. By early afternoon the blaze struck her deaf and blind. She didn't even know me, calling only for my dead little sister, Lielit, calling her name softly and then softer still until finally she was mute.

The temperature soared past 100 degrees. Time passed slowly, as if the day intended to accentuate each moment of Mother's suffering and preserve it in my memory forever. By sundown the desert had sucked the moisture from her body, and she shriveled into a fetal position, her corpse already a mummy.

Father cleaned her and wrapped her in burial cloth. "There will be no unveiling for Mother," he said. "We must dig her grave and erect a cairn."

As I gathered the stones to cover Mother's grave, I visualized the grave of my brother Gobide, the grave of baby Lielit, and the graves of everyone else in our family who had died in The Sudan. I imagined that each grave was a landmark leading us back to Ethiopia, into the past, where we would lift each lost life from the ground, revitalizing it with love during our journey home.

I picked up a fallen branch shaped like the Hebrew letter Gimel. Then I saw three Bedouins pointing rifles at me. The one closest to me said something harshly in a language I didn't understand, and the next moment three bullets shattered my skull, shredding my brain.

Ras was struck by the voice he heard. It was Father's voice and it was Abe's voice, too, a sorrowful voice he'd heard when they were young, lying awake in bed, talking after Mother died. Although it was formal, there was intimacy in the voice, as if he were listening to someone who knew his people. It was the sound of intimacy in Abe's voice, a sound that had been fading this past month since Father died.

Yet it was also a stranger's voice, a dangerous voice, a voice he couldn't listen to. So he pushed away doubt as he had when Mother died, as he had when Father was killed. There could be no uncertainty. And so, denying to himself that he heard any voice at all, he said, "He's got it all wrong. It didn't happen this way."

"What do you mean?" Joost said.

"Mother died in Los Angeles after succumbing to promyelocytic leukemia. And another thing, no one in our family was shot."

"It's fiction," Joost said. "A dramatization of the exodus of your people from Ethiopia."

"Abe just told me that after the car hit Father, he was thinking he could have saved him, but he was paralyzed with fright. The boy in this story tries to save his mother, but he's helpless. All he can do is watch her die," Ras said. "It's fiction, but it's Abe's truth. Can you see? This is his problem. Writing is a crutch. He's using it as an escape, to deal with his grief, turning his back on all of the people he'll be able to help when he's a doctor."

"He's not going to be a doctor. Not for all the money in the world."

"You don't understand," Ras said. "Abe has a responsibility, a moral obligation to use his gifts. He's too young and he's suffering too much grief to see that now. If he doesn't go back to med school by the time he sees this, it'll be too late."

Ras scooped up more pages. A few minutes later, he said, "He's got a dead guy telling the story. What's that about?"

"There are multiple dead narrators in his novel. It conveys an uncanny feeling, as if death were a state of mind," Joost said. "But that's a story-telling technique. It's not the point."

"What's the point?" Ras said.

"Will this story be told? If Abe doesn't tell it, who will?"

Up from Oppression lay on the table beside Teresa's charts. The cold air numbed Ras's throat. "After Abe finishes medical school he'll have his

whole life to tell this story,” he said.

Ras took his father’s raincoat from the entryway closet, walked out of the apartment, and crossed the street. He covered the old man still lying on the bench, soaked and shivering. Then he called for an ambulance and sat beside him; rain falling in sheets; thunder growing louder; lightning flashing brighter, illuminating an afternoon sky darkening into the deep purple of the dead of night.

The Unveiling

Ras dozes in the Prius in front of the police station. The flooded street is the Red Sea about to part; a tap tap on his window is a sign from G-d. But it's only a cop decked out in raingear, telling him he must move his car. He remembers the literary term: pathetic fallacy.

Twenty miles south on Woodlawn Avenue, a quiet residential street in Venice, Mrs. Angelico takes her eight-year-old son, Sal, and her Rottweiler, Prince, out for a walk in the rain.

Three-quarters of a mile up the road Sergei Sergeievich Pakoslav – twenty, muscular, five-ten, wavy-black hair greased back Elvis Presley style – turns his Chevy Nova – a rusting machine belching bilious smoke – onto Woodlawn Avenue. The discordant screams of Nirvana singing “Rape Me” blare over the souped-up sound system.

Sergei's brother, Stas – eighteen, five-four, head shaved, stubble on his chin, rotting teeth – rides shotgun. He wears a gold chain with a Coptic crucifix. Stas – trying to quit coke cold turkey and it isn't going well – has a chalky substance around his mouth, stains of catsup and coffee on his shirt. Intermittently, his jaws clench. His nose drips. He sweats profusely in the cold, wet air.

“Les' score a couple whores, some crack. Then we go straight,” Stas says.

“That's dope,” Sergei says.

Stas spies Mrs. Angelico's red scarf and says, “That babushka's loaded. Les' take her back to her place, see what's she's got.”

Sergei pulls the Nova to the curb and the brothers get out of their car. Prince growls. Stas doesn't see Prince. He sees a dragon on a leash and hears a thunderous roar. He holds his hands over his ears. “It's breathin' fire!”

“It's a dog,” Sergei says. “Shoot it.”

Five months later, Ras sits alone in his apartment in Silver Lake, not knowing what to do and not wanting to do anything. It's unusual for him to sit still, not move, quiet his mind. He misses Father and Abe.

His boards are behind him and they went well. His residency is over and he's just beginning to adjust to normal sleep cycles. He's weighing an invitation from Percival to join his practice. The offer comes with a lucrative research grant. He's been offered a tenure-track teaching post at UCLA. He's considering an assignment from Doctors Without Borders. He's joined a gym, even gone once. And he's been volunteering at the Venice Free Clinic a few days a week. Yet with not very much to do, he's come to understand the meaning of the term "dead tired." When every second of his life was claimed, his energy was boundless. Now every day he wants to go back to sleep a few hours after waking up.

Outside it's crisp and windy. Save for the occasional sound of a passing car or passersby chatting on the sidewalk below his balcony, it's quiet. He thinks back, as he often does, to the lineups. The most recent one was at the police station in Venice where Salvador Angelico identified Stas Sergeievich Pakoslav. Stas was charged with the first-degree murder of Mrs. Angelico and is now residing in the L.A. County jail awaiting trial. The earlier lineup was the one at the police station in Van Nuys.

In Van Nuys, the cop who told Ras to move his car moved on but Ras remained parked on Sylmar Avenue. Forty minutes later, the rain abating, Abe and Joost walked down the steps in front of the station. Abe's head hung low and Ras couldn't see his face. Joost looked grim and mouthed, *it was her*.

Abe got in the back seat and in the rearview Ras could see he'd been crying.

Abe said, "You were right. It wasn't just Father she killed."

Ras tried talking to Abe on the drive home, wanting to know how the police apprehended the woman, what she looked like, what would happen next. Joost answered all of his questions. Abe didn't say another word and now wasn't speaking to Ras again. With the hit-and-run driver also behind bars, the closure hasn't produced the justice Ras had hoped for— Abe seeing the folly of abandoning medicine.

When Ras complained to Joost that Abe wouldn't answer his calls, Joost asked if Ras was ready to give Abe his inheritance. Ras countered, "It's just two more semesters. Why can't you see that?"

Joost said, “He won’t go back to med school. He’s finished his novel about the exodus of the Ethiopian Jews. He’s looking for a publisher.”

The night before Father had been run down by the hit-and-run driver, Ras and Father had spoken of Abe’s genius. Then they’d said good night. The next night he was sitting *Shiva*. Almost a year. Where has it gone? The acceleration of the speed of life was daunting. And what if Abe wouldn’t even speak to him at the unveiling?

On the coffee table is a copy of Father’s magnum opus, *Up From Oppression*. On the cover is a photo of the gates of Auschwitz with the slogan, *Arbeit Mach Frei*. In the last chapter, Father observed that Hitler hadn’t known about the Ethiopian Jews, the Lost Tribe of Dan. Neither did the rest of the Western world. The Ethiopian Jews were His safety net for Judaism.

Father’s final project was chronicling the tribe from its founding by the Queen of Sheba until the first exodus from Ethiopia in the 1970s. Is Abe in his own way continuing this work?

Then it comes to Ras, the point of the game on the way to the lineup. He picks up the phone and calls Abe. When there’s no answer he drives to Abe’s apartment, rings the doorbell. Then he rings again. He’s about to ring a third time when Abe opens the door.

“Hey, Ras.”

“I get it now,” Ras says. “The genocide game.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re saving more Inuits than I’m saving cancer patients.”

“I don’t know about that. I haven’t saved anyone yet. You want to come in?”

Ras lingers on the doorstep. “Joost says you’ve finished your novel. May I read it?”

“Sure,” Abe says. “I’ll bring it over in the morning.”

Ras embraces Abe. This time the tears are in his eyes. “I’m working at the Venice Free Clinic in the morning,” he says. “Can you meet me there at noon? I’ll take you to lunch.”

During the drive home, Ras wonders if reading Abe’s book will influence his view of the injustice of Abe’s decision to abandon medicine; unease settles into his bulky frame.

At home, he walks out onto his balcony. Wind has blown the smog out to sea. Across the universe a shooting star threads the heavens; discomfort

seeps deeper into his bones. He sees infinitely into the past yet he sees no beginning. He sees infinitely into the future, yet he sees no end. He sees no escape until he sees what Moses saw: justice for his people. And he sees what Nietzsche saw: freedom from the eternal return. He sees his own injustice: his refusal to release Abe's inheritance. He sees reconciliation with his brother. He feels light on his feet.

Late the next morning, in the Venice Free Clinic, a toy Koala bear clipped to his stethoscope, as a George Harrison tune, "Here Comes the Sun," pipes softly through the PA system, Ras steps into an examination room to see his last patient.

He nods to Mr. Angelico and says, "How are you, Sal?"

"I'm still eight," the boy answers.

"Let's look at that arm," Ras says. He redresses the wound. "It's healing nicely."

"Dr. Ras? Is Mommy in heaven?"

Ras sits on the examining table next to Sal. Posters of Roald Dahl book jackets – *The Witches*, *Revolting Rhymes*, *Dirty Beasts*, and *James and the Giant Peach* – hang on the walls. "That's something you should talk to your priest about," Ras says.

"She's in heaven with Prince." Sal says. "Prince died trying to save mommy."

Ras says, "I have a present for you." He pokes his head out the door. "Claire? We're ready."

A nurse, holding a Rottweiler puppy, walks in.

"For me?" Sal says, playing with the puppy on the floor. "Can I name him Prince?"

"Salvador?" says Mr. Angelico, tears welling in his eyes. "What do you say to Dr. Demeke?"

The puppy crouches on his haunches, barks at Sal, then scampers away. Sal lunges.

"Watch out for your arm," Ras says.

The puppy reverses field, jumps on Sal, licks his face.

Sal says, "Thank you, Dr. Ras."

A woman's voice over the intercom. "Dr. Demeke? Your brother's here."

Sal picks up the puppy by his front paws.

“Hold him like this,” Ras says, taking the dog, supporting his hind legs.

There’s a disturbance in the lobby, angry words and Abe’s voice, strident, “Calm down, brother.” Then a crash, shattered glass. Oh, Lord, not the grandfather clock.

Ras hurries to the lobby, where splintered mahogany and shards of leaded-beveled glass are strewn. A thin wisp of a young man wearing platform shoes waves a gun. The man chews frantically on something and swaggers. Bulging veins pulse on his neck. The puppy, tail between his legs, urinates.

“Doctor,” the receptionist says, her voice aquiver, “this gentleman says G-d sent him.”

“What do you want, brother?” Abe says to the young man.

Stop stalling!” the man screams. He swings the gun, pointing it at Abe, then at the receptionist, then at Ras, then at the receptionist: a whirligig blur of flashing midnight-blue steel, a farrago of menace and motion—amplified by the receptionist’s shrieks.

The gunman whirls toward the ear-piercing cries. “Shut Up!”

Abe lunges.

The gun fires, and fires again and again and again.

Part V Merchants of Justice



*So the heart be right, it is no
matter which way the head lieth.*
Sir Walter Raleigh before his execution
in the Tower of London.

Ismael

Like a locomotive on the loose, Aurora— holding legal papers — engines into Estella's office on the third floor of the headquarters of the United States Attorney on 4th Street in Miami. With a double take, she stops in her tracks, surprised by the new residents: two agitated canaries in a cage gilded by the afternoon light. Aurora gives Estella a look that says, we should talk. The document she's holding appears to be a state-court order, but Estella can't see the caption.

Aurora, chief of the Economic Crimes Section of the Office of the United States Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, rarely descends to the boiler rooms where her minions — more than one hundred less-senior Assistant United States Attorneys — pitch the coal that powers the wheels of justice. Perhaps Aurora's arrival is a show of deference. After all, this is only Estella's second week back at work since she was raped. Or maybe the visit is merely an expression of Aurora's Southern charm like her stylish attire chosen to complement the figure she works hard to maintain or the sweet, exotic perfumes she favors, fragrances exuding powerful pheromones to beguile male prey.

Estella, one of Aurora's senior lieutenants, riveted by Aurora's new outfit: a coral silk blouse under a Pauline Trigère emerald-green silk suit jacket, is on the phone, listening to Henry Holland Smythe-Russell IV, Esq., defense counsel for the scions of storied money. Everything in her office is arranged meticulously. A vase with a freshly cut rose sits atop her credenza near an 8 x 10 framed photo of her twenty-year-old son, Andrew, in a fighting stance, wearing a black belt around a white taekwondo competition uniform.

She moves her mouse. Her screensaver — Osceola in ceremonial headdress, his face streaked with red war paint, a rifle held over his head, a blue-and-white checkered sash worn over one shoulder, a red-and-tan shirt tied at his waist, falling like a skirt to his mid thighs, buckskin pants, frozen forever in the frenzied step of a war dance — fades to azure wallpaper patterned with logos of the Department of Justice and an Instant Message from Aurora — CAN U COME UP?

Estella plays with the phone cord, raises an eyebrow. She should tell Smythe-Russell that she'll call him back, but Aurora's unexpected visit triggers a remembrance of van Keet, the rapist, who by now is probably playing ping pong or watching HBO in hi-definition at a low-security federal correctional complex.

In too-vivid detail she remembers struggling with van Keet, her teeth fracturing, her jawbone cracking, the feel of her anus tearing, blood on her legs, oozing from her head. These injuries, that pain, are trivial in comparison to van Keet's odious allegation that he was sent by Andrew to rape her, the insult of the slander paling in the light of a court order enjoining her from speaking to her son – incarcerated and charged with aiding and abetting van Keet to rape her – to protect his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination.

A taste of sour rage rises from her throat with the onset of a headache that won't be ameliorated by knowing that before he is released from prison, van Keet will need extensive dental work and won't be able to sit without pain courtesy of a hostile prison environment organized by Aurora.

Estella writes on the legal pad: TALKING TO S-R.

Her canaries chirp excitedly.

Smythe-Russell represents Ismael Erasmus, the defendant in a case Aurora wants settled immediately. To this end, Aurora has secured a court order freezing Ismael's assets in U.S. bank accounts, and with the cooperation of The Cayman Islands Monetary Authority, has frozen his Caribbean-invested funds.

But the case won't settle soon because someone other than Ismael is paying Smythe-Russell's fees at an hourly rate that exceeds the monthly payment on her new Mercedes SL convertible. Smythe-Russell will exhaust his retainer, typically \$250,000, before he'll get serious about settlement. Like it or not, it's the way the game is played. Smythe-Russell won't want whoever is paying his fee to think that getting Ismael a favorable result was easy.

Aurora writes on Estella's legal pad: *cute birds, nice touch. See me ASAP.* Then she departs as swiftly as she entered, the legal papers still in her hand.

Aurora was probably bringing her an assignment to work with the State Attorney on a joint prosecution. The additional work wouldn't be all bad. It's not as if she has a personal life, anyway. And then she realizes with

amusement that she didn't hear a word Smythe-Russell said during her interlude with Aurora.

According to the FBI report on Estella's desk, Ismael Erasmus is a twenty-one-year-old citizen of Sierra Leone. At age nine he was sent to school in London. By age fourteen he was a graduate studying theoretical mathematics at the Centre for Theoretical Cosmology at the University of Cambridge.

When he was fifteen, Ismael returned to Sierra Leone and joined the Revolutionary United Front, a rebel organization with the sole objective of exploiting the Sierra Leone diamond mines. RUF soldiers amputated the hands of men, women, and children in the villages to induce mass fear, subdue the local populace, and reduce resistance. Able-bodied men who were spared mutilation were forced into slave labor in the diamond mines.

Ismael became the driver for RUF General Osman Kallon, now the Sierra Leone Minister of Justice and Ismael's sponsor for a student visa in the United States.

On his way to Florida, where he would pursue post-doctoral studies in astrophysics at the University of Miami, Ismael visited a friend in London, Saad Dalramy, who'd been approached by agents of the U.N. Special Court for Sierra Leone, promising him anonymity in exchange for information and threatening to leak word back in Freetown that he was cooperating if, in fact, he didn't.

In Florida, Ismael made cash deposits in U.S. bank accounts totaling \$993,000, eventually investing most of the proceeds in a Cayman Islands hedge fund. The cash came from the sale of diamonds. It was then that he received news that Saad's severed hands had been dumped on the west lawns of the Cathedral of Canterbury.

As the time for Ismael to renew his student visa drew near, he filed a petition for political asylum, appending e-mails from Kallon ordering him to return home to "assist in the investigation of subversives in London." In her report, Special Agent Andrea Vega, in charge of the investigation, agreed that if Ismael were to return to Sierra Leone, he would be tortured and killed.

Ismael's immigration problems were complicated when federal agents ransacked his apartment, seized his computer, and arrested him on charges of money laundering, smuggling, and racketeering. The indictment alleged that stolen diamonds brought into the United States by Ismael had a value

vastly more than what he declared, and that he sold the stolen diamonds to diamantaires in New York City, who paid for them with the cash proceeds of narcotic sales.

Could Agent Vega prove the diamonds were stolen? Not yet. How would the government prove that Ismael knew he was paid with drug proceeds? With circumstantial evidence still being developed by Agent Vega.

Other than conjecture, there wasn't an inculcating iota— not in Ismael's apartment, not on his computer, nothing in a wiretap, and every cash deposit and wire transfer was duly reported on the proper Treasury Department forms.

Sure, there were inferences. How does a man so young, so new to this hemisphere, develop business relationships within the closed circles of New York diamond dealers and off-shore financiers? His compliance with the laws and regulations governing banking transactions was too perfect. And Ismael's protestations of innocence weren't helped when Henry Smythe-Russell and Georges Bohem, senior partners at Collins, Dickens & Swift, appeared together at the arraignment to represent him. But inferences alone don't convict. Or at least they shouldn't.

Why wasn't Narcotics prosecuting the dirty-diamond dealers? Because the DOJ cast its net over Ismael first, the diamond merchants had time to manufacture customer lists of cash-paying sheiks, chieftains, warlords, and Russian oil tycoons whose identities could be confirmed but who would never talk to U.S. authorities. Knowing of Ismael's arrest, the diamantaires would report the sales and pay income taxes.

So Estella had said to Vega, "You're supposed to have evidence that will get us a conviction before you make the arrest."

"Orders," Vega said. "We're working on it; we'll get it for you."

Ismael wasn't going anywhere. So why arrest him before the evidence of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt had been marshalled?

"Who?" Estella asked. "Who gave you that order?"

"Aurora Goldin," answered Agent Vega.

Ismael believed he'd be killed if he talked, so why would he? For asylum. Ismael was a pawn in jeopardy when Aurora gave the case to Estella.

Estella doesn't remember her job being this hard before she was raped. She'd thought that coming back to work would take her mind off the rape but if anything, her anxieties are now more severe. She drums her fingers on Agent Vega's report as Smythe-Russell, a dead ringer for William Howard Taft, perhaps heavier, cajoles her about probable cause, the Constitution, coincidence, and circumstantial evidence. He threatens to file hundreds of pages of motions and writs if she doesn't accede to his demands for lower bail, release of Ismael's assets, and the DOJ's information about every other person of interest, whether a target or not.

Smythe-Russell wants more than the law requires, but Estella listens to him anyway, or pretends to, hoping that some opening, something Smythe-Russell says, something she thinks of will enable her to persuade Ismael to sing. But she does respect Smythe-Russell professionally and knows that his threat to bury her in pleadings and briefs is not idle.

Collins, Dickens & Swift is an international law firm with a hundred lawyers in the Miami office. Hank Smythe-Russell could easily put a half-dozen associates on the case, keeping Estella and as many of her colleagues as she could recruit working day and night for weeks, months, or more if Ismael's benefactor has the resources to fund such a war. And Smythe-Russell has all but said that he does and that he will.

He has also let slip equivocations about Ismael's innocence. Aurora doesn't care about Ismael's guilt; she just wants to know what he knows. And she appears to be willing to pay a heavy price in the in the form of the resources of her office to get what she wants.

The prosecution of Ismael Erasmus was Estella's first assignment upon returning to work after her medical leave. She appeared at his arraignment two days later and afterward went to Aurora's office – its disheveled appearance a study in contrast with her impeccable wardrobe – to report what had transpired in court.

Memoranda, transcripts, law journals, half-filled legal pads, and mail – opened and unopened – covered the surface of Aurora's desk. Except for her own desk chair and one chair placed beside her desk, every surface was covered with pleadings, volumes of annotated codes, case books and treatises, boxes filled with files and trial exhibits. A seemingly random mixture of these items on the floor formed an obstacle course. Her window

shades were drawn. Light from the overhead fluorescents sparkled in her tennis bracelet.

Estella said, "Ismael Erasmus is a handsome, gentle young man, he has wide innocent eyes. He speaks English fluently with deference in a soft-lilting West African accent. If he testifies, a jury will believe him."

Aurora turned from her computer display to look at Estella.

Estella said, "There's reasonable doubt. How is that going to change?"

Without disturbing a single box, a single stack of files, or even a single sheet of paper on the cluttered floor, Aurora made her way across the room to a cherry-wood table placed on an inside wall facing draped floor-to-ceiling windows. A mahogany case displaying 19th century flintlock dueling pistols hung on the wall above the table. The table held an electric-burner hot plate warming a glass pot filled with steaming water, from which she filled two tea cups with hot water, dropped a teabag into each one, put the cups on saucers.

Reversing her direction, Aurora avoided eye contact with Estella, giving her the impression that her boss was contemplating weighty matters that didn't include the prosecution of Ismael Erasmus. When she was once more sitting behind her desk, she said, "Every time we prosecute someone Andrew's age are you going to presume innocence?" She nodded toward the empty chair.

"I've been sitting all day," Estella said, walking to the windows.

"Hold his feet to the fire," Aurora said. "How innocent can he be? In less than a year, he earned a million – in cash – that we know of."

"You understand the diamond trade?" Estella said.

She drew open the curtains, revealing vistas of Biscayne Bay, the MacArthur Causeway, multimillion-dollar waterfront homes on the Venetian Islands, where her mother lived, where she had grown up. Behind the homes, yachts were moored to docks on the Intracoastal Waterway. Sunlight filling the room, as if blasted from an industrial laser. Although the orange afternoon light softened the dull-blue effect of the fluorescents illuminating Aurora's office, she slipped on a pair of sunglasses.

Aurora said, "When he entered the U.S., at customs at JFK, Erasmus declared \$50,000 as the value of the diamonds. Within a week, before he left New York, he sold them for at least \$1 million, paid in cash."

"Rough diamonds," Estella said, "are likely to fracture, have flaws and undesirable color." She walked to Aurora's desk and picked up her teacup.

“Instead of selling the rough diamonds for their uncut, unpolished value, suppose Ismael offered to split the proceeds of the sale of polished stones with renowned diamantaires. He takes all the risk. They don’t have to know him.

“Suppose further that the rough diamonds fracture, the polished stones have poor color or obvious flaws, or both. Suddenly, Ismael’s fifty thousand is worth five, or less. On the upside, the rough diamonds could yield magnificent stones worth two-million dollars, or more.”

“Stop!” Aurora said. “You’re giving me a headache. Where’s this coming from?”

Estella slumps into Aurora’s desk-side chair, holds the naked ring finger of her left hand up to the light, as if wondering what a man who might offer her a diamond be like. “It’s a preview,” she says, “of the testimony of Ismael’s experts, courtesy of his lawyers Henry Holland Smythe-Russell IV and your transplanted-California friend, Georges Bohem.”

“Hank Smythe-Russell and Georges Bohem are representing Ismael Erasmus? Isn’t that interesting?”

“Interesting,” said Estella, “is not an adjective that describes my concern.”

“For Hank, taking a case pro bono would be sacrilege, even if it had case-of-the-millennia publicity, which this case does not. The combined hourly fee of those two lawyers is more than \$3,000. So who, who is paying their fee?”

“You think they’ll tell us?” Estella said, with wide-eyed naivete that made Aurora laugh. “If you gave me an army, Erasmus will be acquitted.”

“Why the drama?” Aurora said. “Hank will never catch us in the win-loss columns, and as far as I know, based upon what Gnosso Poppodopolis tells me, Georges Bohem is a bumbler of a trial lawyer, didn’t do very well for Andrew at the preliminary hearing, I’m sorry to say.”

“Let’s consider those thoughts in order,” Estella said. “As to our record against Hank, that’s the way it’s supposed to be because we only prosecute when we believe with moral certainty that we can prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. The chances of winning don’t figure into Smythe-Russell’s calculus when he’s deciding whether to take a case.”

“Of course, of course,” Aurora said. “The deck is always stacked in our favor. So tell me, how will Hank create a reasonable doubt that Ismael

didn't know or reasonably suspect that the rough diamonds he sold were stolen?"

"With inexhaustible resources."

"I understand. Everywhere he goes he's trailed by at least two associates with billing rates of \$500 an hour. I wonder if he goes to the john alone."

"Only Bohem came with him. No associates. And only Bohem addressed the court. Hank didn't say a word on the record. He was second chair."

Aurora gives Estella a look of astonished incredulity, the kind of look reserved for such news as, the Sierra Club had endorsed Donald Trump for the presidency.

Estella says, "I tried not to look at Bohem during the preliminary hearing, but I looked at him today. That man is George Clooney handsome."

"Sure, he's a Clark Gable clone," Aurora said. "I know what he looks like. But if you're thinking of asking him out, don't."

"Aside from the obvious reasons, why not?" Estella said nonchalantly.

"Because you wouldn't like his politics," Aurora said. "And because if you did date him, our office would be disqualified from every case handled by Collins, Dickens & Swift."

"You'd said he's a transactional lawyer with a mega book of business. The go-to outside counsel for the likes of GE, Google, Exxon, Oracle," Estella said. "So I have a pretty good guess about his politics."

"What impression did Bohem make in court?" Aurora said.

"Gnossos Poppodopolis must have been smoking something illegal when he told you that Bohem is a bumbler. Bohem can charm the scales off a snake. This morning he files four motions and almost persuades Judge Paz to hear two of them right then and there, ex parte: extensive discovery even though I gave them everything they were entitled to before the hearing, lower bail, release of Ismael's assets, orders allowing depositions in London, New York, the Cayman Islands, and Sierra Leone. We have a week to respond. The hearing will be in two weeks. Look at these briefs," Estella says, looking for a place to put them down. Aurora holds out her hand and Estella gives the legal papers to her. "Must be fifty pages. They're good. Strong writing."

"You thinking of offering him a job?" Aurora says, looking up from the briefs.

“The man is as smooth and cold as liquid-covered moons of Jupiter. At Andrew’s preliminary hearing, his objections during the direct examination were so quick, so precise, and so often granted that Gnosso was stammering. Bohem made it appear as if the man could no more frame a proper question than a first-year law student, a public display of trial-lawyer humiliation you don’t often see.”

Aurora, paying close attention, said nothing. So Estella continued. “And my former friend, the Honorable Murray Rabin? At the preliminary hearing, he was so deferential to Bohem that it would have made me sick if I hadn’t been suppressing urges to laugh at Gnosso.”

“Why would a lawyer with a book of business like Bohem’s,” Aurora said, “have an interest in defending a low-level criminal like Erasmus?”

“Because Bohem wants to curry favor with whoever is paying the Erasmus fee?” Estella said. “Just how close were you and Bohem?”

“He was engaged to my best friend. A long time ago.”

“Is he single now?” Estella said.

Aurora nodded at the blinking cursor on her monitor. “A bad time for sick humor,” she said.

“Why are Andrew and Ismael Erasmus each being represented by this friend of yours?” Estella said.

“I haven’t had the time to think it through,” Aurora said.

“One of those briefs you’re holding is in support of a motion to dismiss the case against Ismael based upon—.” Estella takes the briefs from Aurora and reads from one of them, “‘A complete and total absence of evidence that the diamonds were stolen.’ If we have that evidence, I haven’t seen it,” Estella said. “In two weeks Judge Paz will order us to produce it, pronto.”

Aurora said, “How did Ismael Erasmus, born in a third-world village of farmers and fishermen eking out subsistence livings, come by \$50,000 to purchase rough diamonds and how does he acquire the knowledge and connections to maximize their in a hemisphere he’d not seen before he left home?” Her tone was smug. She carefully rearranged two piles of paper on her desk, as if they were important while this conversation no longer was.

Estella said, “He was educated in England—”

“For a few years.”

Estella said, “When Ismael was fourteen, Stephen Hawking was his Ph.D. advisor at Cambridge. He speaks four languages fluently: English,

German, Afrikaans, and his native Krio, and he has a conversational command of Russian. Now he's a post-doc in theoretical physics."

"He's quite a guy," Aurora said.

"If we give him asylum," Estella said, "he'd become a national treasure."

"Got it," Aurora said. "We're prosecuting Albert Einstein." Rising from her chair, she held up a hand, silencing Estella's imminent objection. She paced behind her desk as if it were the jury box and she was delivering the closing argument. "Let's say Erasmus is an Isaac Newton, a Bill Gates. No, he was a Cecil Rhodes on his way to founding the next De Beers diamond empire when we interrupted his plans. But will a jury believe that Osman Kallon rewarded Ismael for his chauffeuring services with diamonds worth two million dollars?"

Aurora didn't wait for an answer. "The evidence is circumstantial but substantial, proving beyond any reasonable doubt that Ismael Erasmus knowingly brought imported stolen diamonds."

"Stolen from whom?" Estella said. "From Kallon?"

"The only reasonable inference," Aurora said, "is that General Kallon arranged for Ismael Erasmus to pick up the stones in London, sell them in Manhattan, and wire the proceeds back to Sierra Leone. He didn't think that Erasmus would keep the money. But he did."

"No one's heart, mine least of all, is going to bleed for the good general because he was ripped off by Ismael Erasmus, not once they understand how Kallon came to possess those diamonds. *He* stole the diamonds from the blood-soaked, amputated hands of defenseless third-world villagers, from the blood of their parents, daughters and sons. Blood," she said with anguish, gaining momentum, her eyes tearing, "from the axed bodies of mothers throwing themselves over their babies— those people owned the diamonds Erasmus sold. Erasmus knew this just as everyone else in Sierra Leone did, just as the Germans living in the countryside during World War II knew that the trains rolling past their villages carried Jews, women and children included, to the death camps."

"Kallon and Erasmus are war criminals with no ideological agenda, motivated only by profit for themselves gained by means of the inhumanity of genocide. The owners of those diamonds were drenched in their own blood, soaked in the blood of their loved ones. Those people, the countrymen and women of Ismael Erasmus, are the victims. Their

diamonds were stolen and then sold by Ismael Erasmus, who was paid with drug money.”

Aurora’s voice was strong, filled with conviction. “That’s what our experts will say. And after the jury hears from them, they’re not going to pay attention to mind-numbing lectures about clarity and flaws. They’re going to be out for blood— Ismael’s blood.”

Before Estella could object, Aurora said, “Erasmus can plead guilty to jaywalking, be granted asylum, and have a reference of good character when he applies for citizenship if he gives me what I need to nail Ryan Hunter.”

“Who?” Estella said. “Ryan Who?”

“Ryan who must be paying the fees of my erstwhile friend, Bohem, and his sidekick shark, Hank Smythe-Russell.

A photo in the *Herald* of a man – a benefactor of the arts and public education – climbing aboard one of his private jets to pursue eleemosynary interests in West Africa came to mind. He was older, maybe even Aurora’s age, early fifties but sexy and married to an heiress to a fortune in cement, timber, and professional sports franchises. “Orestes Ryan Hunter? You can’t—”

Pointing to a stack of boxes, Aurora said, “Read the documents in those.” The boxes were embossed with the name ORION TRADING in its crimson-and-gold logo.

“You subpoenaed documents from Ryan Hunter?” Estella said.

“That would have been unfriendly,” Aurora said, “putting Mr. Hunter to work gathering everything we wanted. We saved him the trouble.”

“You had the FBI serve a search warrant?”

“A public service for a prominent citizen, a reward for his charitable work.”

“What’s the crime?” Estella said.

“Money laundering. A billion dollars. Conservatively.”

“Then you’re talking about the biggest case in this office since Manuel Noriega.”

“Think Enron,” Aurora said.

“Enron was a drug case?”

“No, Enron was a big case.”

“So why don’t I have an army working on this.”

“Because what I need right now is a scalpel, a mind like yours – sharp as a stiletto, hard as a diamond. And I can’t risk a leak. When the time comes, you’ll have an army.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before?”

“Before when? You’ve been back for two days. You were on medical leave when van Keet told us that he was working for Ryan Hunter.” Aurora glanced at her watch. “Listen, we’ve caught the Erasmus kid in a cloud of smoke so thick there’s only one reasonable conclusion. We’ll prove he set the fire if he doesn’t tell us who did. Anything else? I have to hit the send button for this brief in—” she checked her watch, “ninety-seven minutes.”

“I’d wager a million to one Ismael couldn’t pick Hunter out of a lineup —”

Aurora shrugged, sat and faced her monitor.

“Or vice versa. What if Ismael can’t give you Hunter?”

“Read the files,” Aurora said. “Find out if Orion Trading is a client of Georges Bohem.”

As paragraphs flow seamlessly from the mouth of Henry Smythe-Russell, Estella regrets that she hasn’t yet read the Orion Trading files.

“Hank,” she says. “I’ll read your cases and get back to you.”

“I don’t want my boy in jail another weekend.”

“He can talk.”

“Maybe,” Smythe-Russell says with emotion, “Saad Dalramy, may he rest in peace, has faded from your picture of this case!”

“I’ll call you back,” Estella says. She hears him clear his throat. “Hank, can’t it wait?”

“I just want to say” his voice quavers, “Estella, I’m so very sorry about what happened to you.”

As a rape victim, she hasn’t been publicly identified. “How do you—” she says. And then after a beat, “Of course, Georges Bohem, Mr. Slick-as-Silk.” Neither lawyer says anything until Estella says, “And damn it, Hank, how am I supposed to prosecute the Erasmus case while you’re defending my son? Not that that’s your problem.”

“I’m not going to talk to you about that, Estella. But I can tell you that Mr. Slick-as-Silk persuaded Murray Rabin to dismiss the charges—”

“No way,” Estella says with glee. “Hank, you’re not messing with my head, are you?”

“So at this time, there’s no conflict. I’m glad you’re happy about this. I take it you believe in Andrew’s innocence.”

“And you don’t?”

“The injunction against speaking to your son is dissolved, though we’re asking you, please don’t talk to him about the case.”

“Send me the order, will you, Hank? E-mail it to me now?”

“I can’t. It’s filed under seal to protect your identity. Aurora has a copy, though.”

Of course, she does. But all that Estella manages to say is, “Thank you, Hank.” As she hurries from her office, her canaries are singing.

Aurora gestures to the chair beside her desk. “Want tea?” she says

Estella says, “There’s an order in Andrew’s case.”

Aurora hands Estella the papers she’d brought to her office forty-five minutes earlier. Estella sits on the chair beside Aurora’s desk, willing her hands not to shake as she reads:

Sir Walter Raleigh

In The Circuit Court of the Eleventh Judicial District
In and for Miami-Dade County, Florida

The State of Florida, Plaintiff	Case Number 12 · 2678
-vs-	Order On Defendant's Motions to Dismiss Felony and Probation-Violation Charges Following the Preliminary Hearing
Andrew Good-Eagle Godfrey, Defendant	

_____ /

The State Charges Defendant Andrew Good-Eagle Godfrey as an accessory to the aggravated rape of Ms. Estella Verus, Godfrey's mother, an Assistant United States Attorney, a first-degree felony, and with grand theft of a 2004 Ford pickup truck belonging to Billie Bower, a third-degree felony.

At the preliminary hearing, the State was represented by Deputy State Attorneys Gnosos Poppodopolis and Lisa Margolis. The defendant was represented by his counsel, Georges Bohem and Connie Knight of Collins, Dickens & Swift. At the hearing, the State called four witnesses: Jan van Keet, the confessed rapist; Ms. Verus; Sgt. Jerome Crocker of the Miami Dade Police Department; and Florida Highway Patrol Officer Sergio Marquez-Hernandez. Godfrey called no witnesses.

After the preliminary hearing, Mr. Bohem filed briefs in support of defendant's motion for dismissal of the charges and for dismissal of a separate charge of probation violation. The Court now

makes its findings of fact and conclusions of law and enters its order on Godfrey's motions.

THE RAPE AND RELATED CIRCUMSTANCES

In July of this year, Godfrey was charged with possession of thirty tablets of LSD. He was placed on probation for one year and required to complete a drug-diversion program. If he violates the terms of his probation, he will be sentenced to prison on the drug charge. Among the probation terms was a curfew during the first six months, prohibiting Godfrey from driving between sunset and sunrise or being in public during those hours except in the company of his mother.

Van Keet testified that he was introduced to Godfrey by Billie Bower, Godfrey's friend. Based on Bower's recommendation, van Keet hired Godfrey to deliver packages containing diamonds.

On Friday, September 13, of this year Godfrey failed to make a delivery of diamonds worth \$15,000. Bower and van Keet were waiting for Godfrey when he left home the next day. At gunpoint, they forced him to come with them to van Keet's home in Coral Gables, where van Keet told Godfrey he would have Bower "take care of him." Bower is 6' 2", two hundred pounds. He is a professional body builder and has won body-building contests at the national level. Godfrey is slender, 5' 7", one hundred forty pounds.

Godfrey told Bower and van Keet that when he arrived at the shop where he was to deliver the diamonds, there was a sign on the door saying: "Closed for Shabbat." He said that he intended to deliver them on Sunday morning and that the diamonds were in his bedroom, hidden in the back of his upper dresser drawer. Shortly after midnight, van Keet left Bower, armed with a shotgun, guarding Godfrey. Godfrey told van Keet before he left where he could find his mother's gun. Godfrey said, "Mom likes rough sex. Show her a good time."

Using Godfrey's house key, van Keet entered the home of Ms. Verus. He admitted raping her and testified that he did it at Godfrey's behest. Afterward, he searched for but did not find the diamonds in Godfrey's bedroom. When he returned home, he found Bower gagged and bound to a chair, his neck, arms, and chest bruised. Godfrey was gone and so were diamonds that were worth, according to van Keet, more than \$350,000.

Bower told van Keet that he was guarding Godfrey as instructed when he was blinded by a bright violet light. Then he was choked until he was unconscious. There were bruises on Bower's neck.

Van Keet told Bower that his truck wasn't in the driveway where it had been when van Keet left and wanted to know if Godfrey had permission to take the truck. Bower said that Godfrey did not have permission to take his truck.

Van Keet then took Bower to an emergency department, where he told the medical staff that Bower was hallucinating. Van Keet testified that he hasn't seen Bower since he left him at the hospital. The police haven't been able to find him. The State could not obtain Bower's hospital's records because of federal and state privacy laws and privileges. However, the physician who treated Bower described his injuries when he was interviewed by Sgt. Crocker and confirmed that Bower had suffered the physical injuries described by van Keet and had had a psychotic episode, and had been taken to the psychiatric ward and placed on a 72-hour hold. When the time on the involuntary hold expired, Bower was released from the hospital and hasn't been seen or heard from since.

Ms. Verus testified that she was awakened by van Keet, who threatened her with her own gun before beating and sodomizing her, breaking her two front teeth, her mandible, two ribs, puncturing a lung, and lacerating vaginal and anal tissue, causing her to, in her words, black out. While Ms. Verus was unconscious, van Keet used his cell phone to take photographs of her battered, bloodied, nude body.

When Ms. Verus awoke, she phoned a friend. She was incoherent when the police found her.

She was hospitalized for one week, wore a cervical collar for four weeks, and missed ten weeks of work. Since the rape she's had unexplained (to herself) bouts of crying, withdrawal, and melancholia. She testified without hesitation or doubt about the events and details of the rape. Though at times she did become tearful, angry, or subdued, her affect was appropriate. In no respect did her testimony conflict with the detailed statement she gave the police while she was hospitalized.

The evidence against van Keet was overwhelming: his semen was on his victim's bed sheets and he left a handwritten note placed under Godfrey's wallet and keys, warning her not to call the police. After van Keet was apprehended, Ms. Verus identified him from photographs and in a lineup. Van Keet was charged with a plethora of major felonies and faced life imprisonment. Quixotically, he was also charged by the United States Attorney with assault on a federal officer, Ms. Verus.

THE ARREST AND INVESTIGATION

Florida Highway Patrol Officer Marquez-Hernandez testified that at 2:37 a.m. on September 15, Godfrey was driving north in Bower's truck on I-95 near the Atlantic Boulevard off-ramp, his left tail light out. The officer activated his emergency lights, and Godfrey pulled over. Godfrey had no driver's license. He told Officer Marquez-Hernandez that his wallet and keys had been stolen, that the truck belonged to Bower, who had given him permission to drive it. A computer check with the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles revealed that Godfrey was on probation and restricted from driving at night. He was taken into custody on a charge of violating his probation. Godfrey has made no further statements to the police. No diamonds were found in Bower's pickup truck, on Godfrey's person, or in his home that he shared with his mother.

The State Attorney argues, persuasively, that Godfrey, who was headed away from his home at the time he was arrested, was fleeing, which is evidence of his consciousness of guilt. He also argues that Godfrey had time to warn his mother and that his failure to call her is further evidence of his guilt.

Godfrey's room in Ms. Verus's home was searched, his computer was taken as its hard drive stored potential evidence. On the hard drive was a ten-page document titled "Sounds of Silence." This document describes a six-year-old Seminole boy witnesses a gruesome homicide: the boy's mother kills his father.

MOTIVE

The state argued that the document proved motive, that "Sounds of Silence" is a personal journal entry and that its psychiatric expert witnesses would testify that it shows that the defendant sought revenge against his mother for his father's death. Mr. Bohem objected to this evidence on the grounds of relevance, that its admission would be more prejudicial than probative. Mr. Bohem also made an offer of proof, advising the court that the document, "Sounds of Silence" was material for a short story Mr. Godfrey had written. The court now rules that the document will not be admitted in this proceeding because the state's burden here does not require a showing of motive.

VAN KEET'S PLEA AGREEMENT

In a plea agreement with the State Attorney and the U.S. Attorney's office, van Keet agreed to cooperate with the U.S. Attorney in an ongoing federal criminal investigation, the nature of which

was not revealed during the preliminary hearing. Asked about the federal investigation all van Keet would say is: "I only answer questions. I don't know what they're looking for." Ms. Verus had no personal knowledge of the investigation.

In exchange for his cooperation in the federal investigation, all state charges against van Keet, including the sodomy and other brutal injuries he inflicted on Ms. Verus, were dropped. He pled guilty to the federal charge of assault on a federal officer, Ms. Verus, and is in federal custody serving a one-year sentence, after which he will be deported to his native country, South Africa, where he'll be given a new identity in a witness protection program.

APPLICABLE CRIMINAL PENALTIES

If convicted of the accessory charge, Godfrey faces a sentence of nine to fifteen years. After release from prison, it is customary for the State Attorney to seek indefinite civil commitment of an offender convicted of a violent sex crime. If released from prison – by having served his term or by parole – and from civil commitment, Godfrey would have to register as a sex offender and remain on probation for life. Where he lives and the type of work he would be allowed to do would be severely restricted.

If Godfrey is found guilty of third-degree grand theft, he could be sentenced to the state prison for up to five years.

THE EVIDENCE AND THE BURDEN OF PROOF

It is the burden of the State at the preliminary hearing to show some evidence, no matter how remote or unpersuasive, that each crime the defendant is charged with was committed and some evidence that the defendant committed the crimes. *Chavez v. State*, 832 So. 2d 730 (Fla. 2002).

The State argues that by giving van Keet his house keys, telling him where to find Ms. Verus's gun, and making sexually suggestive remarks about his mother, Godfrey had the intent to have her raped and caused the rape. It further argues that Godfrey knew of van Keet's violent propensities because he himself was abducted by van Keet and held hostage at gunpoint. Lastly it argues that Good-Eagle stole Bower's pickup truck, which was taken without his permission and with the intent of depriving him of its use.

The Court doesn't agree that the evidence supports these conclusions; however, the elements of abetting a rape are less stringent than what the State argues it has established. Anyone who either assists the principal of a crime before the fact or gives the offender aid to commit the crime is guilty as an accessory. Fla. Statutes 777.03 (1) (c).

Here, through van Keet's testimony, the State has produced evidence that Godfrey assisted in the rape of Ms. Verus. Also through van Keet's testimony, the state has produced evidence of grand theft of Bower's truck. The evidence, however, must be admissible. *Stephenson v. Rice*, 574 So. 2d 286 (Fla. 2d DCA 1991). If van Keet's testimony is inadmissible, then the charges against Godfrey of being an accessory to his mother's rape and of grand theft must be dismissed because the state will not have met its burden.

In his motion to dismiss, Mr. Bohem observes that if Godfrey were bound over for trial, by the time his trial began, van Keet would be beyond the subpoena jurisdiction of this court, living under an assumed name in South Africa. Because van Keet would be unavailable to testify at Godfrey's trial for aiding and abetting the rape and grand theft, his testimony in this proceeding would qualify as an exception to the hearsay rule and would, therefore, be admissible at the accessory and grand theft trial. The transcript of van Keet's testimony in this proceeding would be read to the jury.

Before this proceeding began, Mr. Bohem, on Godfrey's behalf, served the U.S. Attorney with a subpoena *duces tecum*, requiring production of evidence relating to the federal investigation of van Keet. The subpoena was narrow in scope, seeking only documentation of statements made about Godfrey, allegedly made by him or about the rape. In his affidavit to this Court filed in support of his request for the subpoena, Mr. Bohem claimed that he needed the information to adequately cross examine van Keet in this proceeding.

The U.S. Attorney had the federal court quash the subpoena authorized by this court.

Accordingly, Mr. Bohem argues that in this proceeding because he was unable to adequately cross examine van Keet, a violation of Godfrey's rights under the confrontation clause of the Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which provides in part: "In all criminal proceedings

the accused shall enjoy the right to . . . be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory processes for obtaining witnesses in his favor.”

Although the right to confront one’s accusers dates to early Judaic Law, the Confrontation clause of the Sixth Amendment finds its origins in the 1603 trial of Sir Walter Raleigh for treason. *Ohio v. Roberts* 448 U.S. 56 (1980). Decision by Justice Scalia.

Lord Cobham, Raleigh’s alleged coconspirator against King James I, implicated Raleigh in an *ex parte* examination before the Privy Council and in a letter. At Raleigh’s trial, Cobham’s out-of-court statements and his letter were read to the jury.

Raleigh objected to this evidence, claiming Cobham lied to curry favor with the king to save himself. Suspecting that if he were confronted in court before the jury, Cobham would recant, Raleigh demanded that the judges call him to appear, arguing, “[t]he proof of the common law is by witness and jury: let Cobham be here, let him speak. Call my accuser before my face..”

The judges refused, and despite Raleigh’s protestation that he was being tried “by the Spanish Inquisition,” he was convicted and sentenced to death. He was taken from the court to the Tower of London, where he was beheaded.

One of Raleigh’s trial judges later lamented, “The justice of England has never been so degraded and injured as by the condemnation of Sir Walter Raleigh.” After Raleigh’s death, a series of statutory and judicial reforms limited the abuses of conviction on *ex parte* testimony, including promulgation of the rule that a suspect’s confession could be admitted only against himself and not against others he implicated. G. Gilbert, *Evidence* 216 (1791).

Following the passage of the Sixth Amendment, early state court decisions held: “No man shall be prejudiced by evidence which he had not the liberty to cross examine.” Moreover, the opportunity to cross examine must be adequate. e.g. *State v. Webb*, 2 N.C. 103 (1794) decided a mere three years after the adoption of the Sixth Amendment.

The State doesn’t quarrel with these authorities. Rather, it argues that Godfrey’s cross examination of van Keet at the preliminary hearing was adequate because the only advantage that Godfrey might have gained from access to the subpoenaed files would have been additional

impeachment of van Keet, and that in the preliminary hearing, the weight of a witness's testimony – impeachment of van Keet in this instance – is irrelevant.

As Mr. Bohem correctly observes, the State misses the point as the Court cannot say, without having seen the subpoenaed files, that Mr. Bohem had an adequate opportunity to cross examine van Keet. Accordingly, van Keet's testimony is not admissible in this proceeding.

Mr. Bohem also argues that the probation violation charge must also be dismissed because Godfrey will be unable to defend himself without waiving his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination on the accessory charge, which the State may reinstate at any time until there has been a full trial or passage of the statute of limitations. The Court will decide whether to cross or not to cross that proverbial bridge at the time of the probation violation hearing.

Therefore, it is Ordered, Adjudged, and Decreed that the accessory charge and the grand theft charge against Godfrey are dismissed without prejudice. The restraining order prohibiting Ms. Verus from talking to Godfrey is hereby terminated.

The Court on its own motion now reduces Godfrey's bail to \$100,000 pending hearing on the probation violation charge and sets trial on that cause for January 14 in this Courtroom at 8 a.m.

_____/S/_____

Maurice R. Rabin, Circuit Judge

Ryan

Estella reads the opinion quickly, scanning the pages, skipping to the end to see the final order. She thinks of sipping the tea Aurora offers but imagines spilling it, soaking the documents on Aurora's desk, and staining her own outfit, a *peau de cygne* blouse and Poiret twill skirt prêt-à-porter 1920s retro ensemble. So she leaves the teacup on Aurora's desk and reads the order again, savoring each word, hearing the judge's voice – stern, inquisitive, impatient, reverent, professorial.

She's disturbed that someone in her office, probably Aurora, prevented Andrew from obtaining evidence he needed for his defense though she appreciates the irony in the result. But those feelings pale in comparison to her grief and rage upon learning that Billie Bower – a boy who had lived with them the year following his father's death, a year in which his mother was in and out of rehab – was complicit in her rape.

Estella says, "Thanks for the tea."

"Where are you going?"

"To the county detention center to see Andrew. Then I'm going to find Billie Bower and shove something very hard, like the barrel of my shotgun, up his ass and ask him how he likes it."

"When we find Andrew, we'll let you know," Aurora says. "Someone posted his bail and— he's gone."

"Who?" Estella says. "Who posted the bail? Certainly the bondsman knows."

"We're on it," Aurora says, and there's not much hope in her voice.

Without identification, without a cent, Andrew walks out of the Miami-Dade County Detention Center into brilliant sunlight. He's read the judge's order, sent to him by his lawyer, Georges Bohem, but he doesn't know who posted his bail or who's been paying his high-priced lawyers. He asked Georges, of course, when he agreed to be represented by him, but all that Georges would say was that his benefactor insisted on anonymity and that for many years, from time to time, his benefactor had retained counsel for defendants in unusual high-profile cases whom he believed to be innocent

and who were men or women of exceptional character and accomplishments.

“Don’t say that,” Andrew said.

They were in a room in the detention center reserved for lawyer-client consultations. Because Andrew had been driving away from the scene of his mother’s rape, the prosecution had argued that he was a flight risk and that bail should be set prohibitively high. Murray Rabin had agreed and set \$5 million as the amount of bail.

“Say what?” Georges said.

“There’s nothing exceptional about me,” Andrew said.

“Obviously, we don’t agree.”

“Lately when someone says I’m special, bad things happen.”

“Are you superstitious?” Georges said.

“I can afford a lawyer,” Andrew said.

“Not one with the resources that will be necessary to win your case,” Georges said. “Your money is tied up in the trusts set up for you by your great-grandparents and your grandmother. And the tribe is withholding your monthly stipend until your legal troubles are resolved. And what was that drug-diversion plea dealing your former lawyer got you all about? That LSD wasn’t yours.”

“Is there anything you don’t know?” Andrew said.

“I know that you don’t use drugs and you certainly don’t sell them. You don’t need the money, and how much profit could there be in thirty tablets of LSD? You were covering for Billie Bower.”

“You make it sound simple. Even my mother didn’t get that.”

“She would have,” Georges said. After a brief silence he continued, “Even if I agreed to represent you on your own dime, hoping you’d pay me after you’re found not guilty, you still couldn’t afford me. Hell, I couldn’t afford me.”

Andrew laughed.

“I don’t set my rates, the firm does. For a court appearance, the charge is \$10,000 for any portion of a half day. So if I’m in court in the morning and have to return in the afternoon, the charge is \$20,000 no matter how long I’m there. For work outside of court, my time is billed at \$1,750 per hour.”

“A nice, round number,” Andrew said. “What if I’m not innocent?”

“Of aiding and abetting the rape of your mother? You didn’t,” said Georges. “And grand theft? Your accuser admits he and his sidekick kidnapped you at gunpoint. Who’s going to blame you for using the sidekick’s truck to get away? What I haven’t figured out, why would Billie Bower help kidnap you? Why would he stand by while van Keet was leaving to rape your mother?”

Andrew said, “What makes you think that Billie Bower knew that van Keet would rape my momma?”

Georges said, “Billie knew Van Keet was a violent sexual predator.”

Andrew said, “The other defense lawyers I’ve talked to say the evidence against me is overwhelming.”

“That’s why you need me,” Georges said without a hint of mirth.

“At least you’re modest,” Andrew said.

“I’m not used to begging a client to retain me, especially when my services will be free.”

Georges said that if Andrew retained him, he would immediately file a writ, asking the court of appeals to reduce the amount of the bail to something reasonable.

Georges also said, “Everything we talk about is protected by the attorney-client privilege. No one can legally compel me or you to reveal what we’ve told each other.”

“Everyone knows what the attorney-client privilege is,” said Andrew.

“One condition of my representing you is that you not give up the privilege, not unless I say it’s okay. And that could be never.”

“I get it,” Andrew said. “A writ of silence.”

A white Mercedes limousine waits at the curb. A uniformed chauffeur holds open the back door, gesturing for Andrew to get in.

In the backseat a man who is probably in his mid-to-late forties – long blond hair graying at the temples and pulled back in a ponytail, wearing Dockers and Gucci loafers – is on a cell phone. When he sees Andrew, he ends the call.

“Hello, Andrew,” he says, extending his hand, smiling. “Ryan Hunter.”

“Hey, Ryan,” Andrew says, returning the smile, shaking hands with Ryan.

Part VI Al and Hailey



Victim of Love

Alfred stands on the veranda off his second-floor study, resting a hand on a limestone balustrade, gazing into soft golden late-afternoon light past gazebos, koi ponds, manicured gardens, and trim lawns sloping to the docks where his fifty-four foot sport yacht, *The Octopus*, is moored behind his home on Biscayne Bay. Near the docks, his son, Jacob, expertly flips his wrist and a Frisbee sails over the lawn toward his friend, Pierre, who backpedals, his arm extended, his hand open, but before he can grab the flying disk, Argos, the family's labradoodle, jumps high, snatches the Frisbee, then gallops toward the house, the Frisbee in his mouth, the boys in pursuit.

Al searches for the words he'll have to say to Jacob on the Saturday morning, only one week hence, when they'll troll for sailfish in the Gulf Stream. He'll just have to come right out with it. There will be confusion on his son's face.

Jacob will say, "What does that mean, Dad, racketeering?"

Waves will lap the hull; seagulls will chirp for alms. Becoming inert like a mollusk tossed in the tides, Al will be unable to say more.

Hailey, wearing a bikini, waves to him from a chaise lounge by the pool. Sunbathing beside Hailey is Al and Hailey's lifelong friend, Aurora Goldin, an Assistant United States Attorney. The top of Aurora's bikini, even skimpier than Hailey's, frames her cleavage. While Hailey's stomach is flat, Aurora's is ripped, like his own. Tight bodies for fifty-year-old women, bodies that will stay strong because they belong to women determined to be strong.

Aurora whispers something to Hailey, kisses her lightly on the lips, and they laugh. He marvels that women can be so physically yet platonically intimate and shudders at the thought of men trying to kiss him while he's in prison.

In high school, he'd had a crush on Hailey and had planned to ask her out, but before he could she was going steady with Georges Bohem, one of the boys who was going to go to college. She was a member of his congregation, so years later he wasn't surprised when she expressed her

condolences at his mother's funeral. He was surprised when she called the next week to ask him to meet her for drinks after work.

A few months later she'd suggested a picnic on a secluded beach. She brought a gourmet lunch and a vintage bottle of French Chablis. After they ate, she slipped out of her bikini and waded into the water.

"Are you coming?" she'd said.

An hour later, lying on a towel on the warm sand, she ran her tongue over his chest, his thighs, his scrotum, and he took her into his muscular arms and made love to her until the sun was setting and the beach growing cold.

Afterward, she'd said, "One of us had to make the first move."

On the veranda, Al thinks, soon, very soon, too soon, day after day, year after year, he'll be waking up without Hailey beside him. Undoubtedly, Aurora will end her friendship with him when she learns of his crimes. He will miss Jacob's high school graduation, college graduation, his wedding, the bris of his grandsons. Will he even meet them? Will Jacob stay in touch? His love for his wife, his son, his friend, his feelings of loss deepen his already near-bottomless regret.

Hailey calls to him, "Al, is it time?"

He knows he must dress for dinner. But he doesn't move, and when she comes onto the veranda, it's dusk. Giant birds of paradise and coconut and traveler's palms are backlit by low-voltage lights. She stands behind him, slips her hands under his shirt, and massages his back.

"Who are you tonight?" she says. "Hamlet, taking up arms against a sea of troubles, or Prufrock, overwhelmed by the question, 'Do I dare to eat a peach?'"

He doesn't like it when she quotes literature, especially when he doesn't know where it comes from or what it means. He wants to ask her, who is Prufrock? But he doesn't want to embarrass himself. So he hesitates, hoping she'll tell him, but, of course, she doesn't. Prufrock? It sounds familiar. She's probably told him before about Prufrock, but he just can't remember, not with so much on his mind, so much to do to arrange his affairs, so many decisions to make.

"You better get ready, love, or we'll be late," Hailey says.

When he was first visited by the FBI, he was told that he was a target of a federal investigation into a host of white-collar crimes that by comparison

made Enron or Countrywide look like petty theft. Since then his mind had raced over the past, into the future, covering a gambit from denial to vengeance to remorse. Now, reluctantly, he's accepted the inevitable: humiliation, alienation from his family and friends; poverty; incarceration.

He wants to tell Hailey about the plea bargain that his lawyer hopes to get him. If he gets the plea his lawyer has proposed, at the arraignment he'll be taken into custody; the government will seize their home, *The Octopus*, their bank accounts, and everything else.

He decides to wait. He wants to enjoy his time with her and Jacob before he's imprisoned. And he'll never tell her that he's taking all the blame to protect them.

On the day he will plea bargain, a half hour before sunrise, two FBI agents follow Al through the lobby of the Hay-Adams Hotel. He doesn't see them; he sees their shadows thrown by light from chandeliers hanging from an ornate ceiling. The shadows have stalked him on and off for two months, so he knows they're dressed, as he is, in white reflective running shoes, shorts, and T-shirt even though it's fifty degrees outside.

He walks between columns from which barrel vaults rise into perpendicular arches. Exiting the hotel, he follows the vapors of his breath around the circular drive, gazes for a few moments at the White House illuminated in the dark. Then he leans against a cherry tree, beginning his pre-run stretching.

During the investigation that preceded the secret indictment, three men had walked into his office unannounced. Two of the men, large as NFL linebackers, wore dark suits. The third, a diminutive Latino, wiry, wore tan slacks, beige deck shoes, a short-sleeved brightly colored sport shirt. He had a cobra-poised-to-strike tattoo on his forearm. Al thought he recognized him, but he wasn't sure.

The Latino said, "Call me Matteo."

One of the larger men overturned a crystal decanter— a gift from Al's boss and lifelong friend, Ryan Hunter. The spill soaked a loan-participation agreement that Al would never understand but, as president of the bank, he was obligated to sign. Al tried to rise to confront the intruders, but they pushed him back into his chair.

On a laptop, Matteo played a clip of a high school baseball game—Hailey cheering, Al coaching, Jacob pitching. A slideshow of teenagers with amputated arms scrolled across the screen, every other frame displaying the severed limb.

“Boys in the so-called witness-*protection* program. for Jacob, we’d amputate right about here,” he said, pointing. A stiletto sprang from a switchblade. Matteo dumped the bloody contents of an envelope in Al’s lap. “An indiscreet husband; his wife’s tongue,” he said.

Al was retching when the men left.

Where Pennsylvania Avenue turns toward the Hill, Al darts around slower joggers and picks up his pace. At Tenth Street, he approaches the FBI Building, which he’d visited on a field trip with his high school class thirty-two years before. He remembers standing before an exhibit of the death mask of John Dillinger: Old Testament justice on public display.

When he’s abreast of the FBI building, one of the shadows runs beside him, gives him a thumbs-up. “Hey, Al,” he says. “Curious choice of routes.” The agent’s blond hair encroaches the top of his ear lobes. Al’s hair is closely cropped. The agent’s forehead is smooth – as if the man hadn’t a care in the world – contrasting with ridges of heartburn and insomnia carved across the brow of Al’s face, mapping the years of deceit he’s had to mask.

“Get a haircut!” Al says, running faster, leaving the agent behind. His repartee was lame, but he’s pleased he was fast enough on his feet to think of something to say.

He runs under the Interstate bridge and when he turns right at the border of the Capitol grounds, one of the shadows is gone, the other lagging but still within sight. He turns right on Independence Avenue, running even faster, and when he circles the Washington Monument at sunrise, the shadows have vanished. He finishes his daily-six-mile run feeling strong.

At nine o’clock Al and his lawyer walk into the prosecutor’s office. The nameplate on the door says Theo Langford. Involuntarily, Al’s fists clench when Langford – tall and thin with shaggy hair and a gold ear stud – says “Not a minute less than twenty-five years.”

In an interplay of light and dark, life and death, Al visualizes the sorrowful eyes of zebras, their heads, striped black and white like prison garb, mounted in the den of Melvin, his recently deceased father-in-law. If

Melvin had known of Al's crimes, he'd have splayed him like one of the deer they'd hunted with bow and arrows. Spasms of pain knot in Al's calves. Fear clings to him like a leech.

"Take your best shot, Bud," his own lawyer says in a southern drawl, taking Al by the elbow. "Looks like we've wasted our time."

They walk out the door and his lawyer, a former boxer Al met in the Navy, still solid as the U.S. dollar, whispers, "Walk slowly, he'll come after us."

An hour later, Al signs a plea agreement in a soon-to-be-filed case titled *The United States of America vs. Joshua Alfred Rosen*.

That evening, when he comes home, Hailey says, "Aurora told me."

He tries to explain, but she cuts him off.

"Take me upstairs," she says.

He flounders up the circular staircase and onto the landing that floats above the marble floors of the entry, where he's seized from behind; powerful hands choke him until, gasping, he falls into unconsciousness. When he revives, he's underwater, unable to breathe, Hailey and Melvin beside him. The water turns blood red. His vision occludes. The apparition of his father-in-law fades.

Then he's on a gurney. Paramedics remove his shirt, shoes, and socks, but he can't feel a thing, not the weight of his body, the sheets beneath him, or Hailey's hand on his arm. They carry him down the stairs. With the jostling he regains sensation, pain searing through his optic nerves.

He's had a brain-stem stroke. After three months, he can only move his eyes and can't feel anything below his ears. The morphine drip keeps him calm but does nothing to extinguish the inferno of a migraine more severe than any he could ever have imagined.

On most days soft breezes and the scent of flowers fill his room, but on this day the air is as still as a dead man's breath. A fly hovers over him, its buzz growing louder until it's deafening. He closes his eyes.

He was thirteen, holding his mother's hand at his father's funeral, standing under an umbrella in Lakeside Memorial Park.

He opens his eyes. In his hospital room, the fly crawls into his ear, pricking his desiccated skin. Grinding pain renders him blind. He shuts his eyes.

At his father's funeral the rabbi said, "Chief Petty Officer Arnold Rosen was a hero." Even though it was raining, it was hot, and the sun was brilliant. Raindrops on his father's coffin refracted daylight into rainbows. A rainbow spectrum scraped the sky, sounding a note, the tones blending harmoniously into chords, which progressed into a requiem that crescendoed. Swans glided across the lake. Spirits roamed, ghosts on horseback paraded. The wreaths beside the grave were drenched, reeking of decay.

Mourners crowded the graveside: his friend Andy Ross and his parents, Dolores and Kermit, and Ryan Hunter and his parents. Across the grave from where he stood, Hailey, skinny, also thirteen, held her father's hand. She hadn't known his father well but sobbed as if she had. His father's ghost stood beside her. She leaned against the wraith, wiping tears from her cheeks.

After the Kaddish, as the others walked to their cars, he remained by the grave. Someone approached.

"Al?" Hailey said. It wasn't her thirteen-year-old voice he heard.

He opens his eyes. In his hospital room, unable to move, he panics. He closes his eyes.

Again Hailey said, "Al?" They weren't in the cemetery. He and Hailey were thirty, married nine months. The Spring semester at the high school where she taught English had just ended. She stood near her packed suitcase in their Coconut Grove apartment, wearing red fuck-me pumps and a slinky dress that said: SEX BUT NOT WITH YOU. He was aroused nonetheless by the freckles on her cleavage, the shape of her runner's legs, the golden streaks in her auburn curls.

"Hailey, please— we're going to make this work."

"After nine months of marriage, it's not supposed to be work!"

Ché, their African-Gray parrot, squawked. “It’s off to work we go.” The parrot hung upside down. “Al’s a sad sack.”

He stared at the bird, incredulous. Hailey laughed. “When did you learn to say that?” she said and opened the cage. Ché hopped into her arms and she rocked him like a baby.

When was the last time she’d held him?

“Let’s sing,” Ché squawked.

His eyes open. Jacob, tall, strong like Al had been, stands near his hospital bed. In the fall his son will be a senior, but he hasn’t spoken about his SAT scores, college applications, or Al’s crimes. Maybe he doesn’t know. “Aurora sent these,” Jacob says, arranging wildflowers in a vase.

When he was in the navy, Aurora had served together on the board of their synagogue. During hospital visits, Aurora, like Hailey, often reads to him. Unlike Hailey, Aurora hasn’t mentioned his crimes. Yet.

“Want to listen to music?” Jacob says.

Al blinks once and Jacob puts a CD – *American Beauty* – into a player. The Grateful Dead sing, “This is all a dream we dreamed/One afternoon long ago.” His eyes close.

In their Coconut Grove apartment on the day Hailey left him, she played with her parrot. “Will you miss me?” she said to the bird.

Al said, “Where are you going?”

She put *American Beauty* on the turntable. “You can make your dreams come true when you accept that I’m not part of them,” she said. It had been four months since they’d made love.

“Will you come home before the school year begins? Are you quitting your job?”

Ché hopped onto the coffee table. Al snatched his journal before the bird could leave droppings on it.

Robb, a friend at the bank, had said, “You’re stymied, afraid you’ll make things worse. When she insults you, write it down. When you show her, she’ll beg for forgiveness.”

He opened to a page to read something she’d said: you don’t have to be Einstein to have a backbone.

Now was the time to show her how she'd undermined him. But what would she think of him writing it all down? *Al the schlub, making notes.* He said, "I'll leave."

"And I should stay here?" She opened the bathroom door. "This place is a pigsty." A puddle pooled around a bath towel on the floor carelessly left on the bathroom floor.

The kitchen gleamed, the doors and window frames he'd recently dusted were vibrant in high-glass pastel tones, the Birds-of-Paradise-and-palmetto-fronds pattern in the percale that covered the throw pillows and sofa matched the curtains. The crystal she'd selected for her bridal registry sparkled in a display case.

"That's your towel," he said.

She walked out, the front door closing behind her with a whoosh, as if blowing him a kiss.

He wanted to yell, *I'll police the floors for towels.* But on the porch he froze in a paralysis that had first gripped him in childhood, riding a carousel pony, his world spinning round and round beyond control like the events of his life— his father killed on the deck of an aircraft carrier; poor grades disqualifying him from playing football his senior year in high school; a hand grenade that was supposed to be disarmed exploding during a training exercise, mortally wounding Andy, who died in his arms; and now this, Hailey passing from his life like a dying breath.

He wanted to rush off the porch yelling, *Hailey, Hailey!* But he was as stiff as one of the brightly painted wooden carousel ponies.

He opens his eyes. Hailey is reading to him from Goethe's *Faust*, the first words of Mephistopheles in the play – "Lie there, poor wretched, seduced you come/To bonds of love that brook no treason. /The man whom Helen has struck dumb/Gropes long ere he regains his reason."

He has no idea what these words mean. Who is Faust? Goethe? Helen?

Hailey puts the book down and says, "Hundreds of people who trusted you are going to lose everything. You've got to help."

He's misjudged his wife. She'd driven modest cars, worn off-the-rack department store clothing. She didn't have to work but she loved teaching high school English, which had never been a subject he enjoyed.

Loving her more than ever, he blinks twice. He'll divulge nothing.

Her hand on his forehead is spring rain. His eyes close.

A month after Hailey had left Al for a destination unknown, in Coral Gables he and his boss, Robb, strolled past beds of begonias and box hedges lining the outer boundaries of the sidewalks along Miracle Mile—a broad street with upscale art galleries, boutiques, live-performance theaters, two lanes of traffic in either direction, a center divider planted with palmettos, sago and fan palms. They were on their way to lunch at Zadie’s Deli. It was the time of day Robb usually consoled Al about his marriage.

“Have you heard from Hailey?” Robb said.

“No,” Al said. “Not yet.” His athletic build towered over Robb’s pudgy frame. Robb was short of breath, so Al stopped to look in a jewelry store window to give Robb a moment to rest.

“Wrong, wrong, wrong,” Robb said. “That’s not what she wants.” He rested. Then they walked on. “Well, as I was saying, Geraldine Ferraro? What was Mondale thinking?”

“That he wanted the women’s vote?” Al said.

“You see? That’s one of your problems,” Robb said. “You don’t understand human nature. Ronald Reagan, he understood human nature. That’s why he carried the women’s vote by a landslide.”

Al said, “I told Hailey that voting Democrat—”

“Democratic,” Robb said.

“Maybe that’s why she left me. Politics.” Al said.

“As usual, you’re missing the point,” Robb said. “Women are by nature jealous and distrustful of other women. It’s how they’re wired. A woman needs a strong man with his hands on the controls. Oh, I know, you’ve got the fringe elements like Betty Friedan. But the lesbian vote doesn’t swing elections.”

Al said, “But Hailey didn’t vote for Reagan.”

“If you give her jewelry,” Robb said, “it will make you look weak.”

They stepped into the deli and Rob nodded to a stout redhead, who wore pastel muumuu. “Hey, Zadie,” he said.

“Hey yourself, Robb. I got that booth in the back.”

As Zadie led Robb and Al past crowded tables, a lanky man in a herringbone sharkskin thousand-dollar suit grabbed Al’s hand, rose from the table where he’d been sitting, and they embraced. Wavy blond hair parted in the middle, cresting above a high forehead, fell to the shirt collar of his old friend Ryan Hunter.

A short Latino, his forearm tattooed with a rose, and two Asian men stood.

After introductions, Ryan's gaze dropped, his voice cracked. "Andy—"

Silence. Then Ryan said, "When I visited Coach Ross and Andy's mom, they told me you're working for First American." He handed Al his business card. "Call me. We're not happy with our bank."

When they were seated, Robb said, "You know Ryan Hunter how?"

"High school friends. Kermit Ross was our football coach."

"Kermit Ross? The janitor? He was a high school teacher?"

"He's not a janitor. He's our chief engineer, works in corporate, supervises dozens of other guys. He quit teaching high school after Andy was killed. He couldn't—he couldn't be around kids who were Andy's age all the time."

"Really? I didn't know we had a Negro in corporate. I've never seen him in a suit."

"He wears a suit every day," Al said. Robb shook his head in disbelief.

"When I got out of the navy," Al said, "Kermit got me my job at First American."

Robb slathered rye bread with two pats of butter. "What are you having?"

"Do I have the promotion?" Al said.

"Well," Robb said, clearing his throat, "I went to bat for you, but I struck out."

Shit. Was it better not having to tell Hailey of yet another failure than to bear the disappointment alone? He could hear her father scolding her: "A *putz*! You could have married a *mensch*. But no, you had to marry a *putz*."

"So, who's my new branch manager?"

"Let's talk big picture—"

"My career is a big picture." Al said.

"Ted Court."

"*Ted Court*?"

Robb put a hand on Al's arm. "Shush," he said.

"Ted's been with the bank what, six months?" Al said. "How old is he?"

Robb ate the bread, then buttered another slice.

"Behind my back," Al said, "that insubordinate rat said I was the dumbest bulb in the chandelier. I told you about that and now you're making him my boss?"

Robb said, “It wasn’t my decision. Al, as your friend, I must advise you to see Ted’s promotion for what it is. You’ve found your niche . . .”

Al lost the thread of Robb’s advice, watching an animated conversation at Ryan’s table. The Latino, in his early thirties, pumped a clenched fist in short emphatic strokes as he spoke. The Asian men, in their fifties, sat impassively, one with his hands folded in his lap, the other with his palms on the table. When the man with the rose tattoo stopped speaking, the Asian men remained stoic, without expression, saying nothing. The Latino rose from his seat and leaned across the table until he was almost nose to nose with one of the Asian men. The man blanched. Ryan placed his large hand on the short man’s shoulder, easing him back into his seat.

He opens his eyes. In his hospital room, Aurora playfully tugs his toes. He sees her doing it, but for all he feels, she could be tugging on the cord that closes the drapes.

After Hailey left him, Aurora became his confidant. When he’d told her Robb’s theory of women, she’d said, “I’d bet the bank he’d want my hands on his controls.” She’d also said, “I’ve told Hailey that she’s being a fool.”

Sweat drips from his forehead. Aurora dries his face, then shows him a photograph of a man, a tattoo of a cobra on his forearm. “Efrím Escante. You know him?” she says.

Al blinks twice.

She shows Al a photo of a million dollar check payable to Escante Petroleum issued by First Global Bank in Jakarta. The head of the cobra tattooed on the Latino’s forearm had been a rose. Al’s eyes close.

Walking to the bank from the deli, Robb said, “Take me with you when you see Ryan Hunter.”

“He doesn’t know you.”

“You won’t land the account on your own.”

“Why not?”

“What’s Hunter’s business?”

“I don’t know.”

“Trading futures in precious metals,” Robb said. “What’s the name of the federal agency that regulates commodities? What would trigger the bank’s obligation to honor one of his letters of credit? What kind of collateral would the bank want for the credit he needs? The bank won’t share his risk. So how do you tell him that without pissing him off?”

All Al saw was gridlock, all he heard was traffic, all he could breathe was exhaust.

He opens his eyes. Aurora says, “We’ll protect Jacob and Hailey.”

She knows his family’s been threatened, but she doesn’t care. Not about him. Not about Hailey and Jacob. What does Aurora care about? Who does she care about? He’s known her since childhood. She’s never married, never even had a boyfriend for very long. And then it comes to him. He knows, but he’s never seen it before. She doesn’t care about love. Her passion is vengeance. That’s what motivates her, has always motivated her. Well, he’ll have no part of it. He’s above revenge. Especially now, considering the stakes. He closes his eyes.

In September, shortly before the beginning of the Fall semester Hailey called Al, leaving him a message saying she was back and wanted her things. A few days later, she let herself into the apartment. “Where’s Ché?” she said.

Ché squawked. “What’s for dinner?”

A trim woman in a fashionably short skirt and sheer lavender blouse over a lilac-lace-pushup bra introduced herself. “Bonnie Morris, Keyes Realty.”

Hailey said, “A pleasure,” taking the woman’s outstretched hand.

The realtor said, “Your husband has exquisite taste. He’s selected a fabulous on Biscayne Bay.”

Hailey took Al by the arm. “Please excuse us.”

The clutter of accessories she’d left strewn throughout their bedroom was gone. Cosmetics she’d left in disarray were arranged neatly on her vanity. The bed was made, the bathroom immaculate.

She brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. “You look different.”

“Is that a criticism?”

“*Au contraire.*”

“Meaning?”

“What is that woman talking about? A foreclosure? Why isn’t she meeting you at the bank?”

“What’s that have to do with how I look?”

“Her outfit is shameful.”

“Did you go to California? Did you see Bohem?”

“Did you get a new job?”

“I’m promoted. You never believed in me.”

“I married a decorated military hero, like his father, like my father. You’re still my hero. But I’m angry with you for taking abuse from Robb and those other vultures at the bank. They don’t deserve you.” She sat on the bed.

He sat on the bench by her vanity, facing her. “I’m vice president for international operations.”

They said nothing else until papers rustled in the living room.

“Want to look at the house with me?” he said.

“Will you pick up your towels?” He sputtered. She laughed and took his hand.

He opens his eyes, hoping Aurora has left his hospital room. She stands by his bed, still holding the photo of the million-dollar check. “Do you know about this?” she says. He closes his eyes.

Despite Robb badgering him daily, Al didn’t call Ryan, but Ryan had finally called him, turning his weed-patch career at First American into an oil patch.

A month after Hailey had left him, Al stood before an art deco low-rise with a pink marble façade on Galliano Street in Coral Gables wearing a tie with a birthday-cake, party-hat, and lit-sparkler design. Granite lettering on the building said, ORION TRADING. When he walked in, the receptionist said, “Happy birthday, Mr. Rosen.”

“Thank you, Jenni,” he said, self-aware but without a hint of understanding How did you know?”

“Mr. Hunter said to send you right up.”

He walked past traders yelling into telephones and back and forth at one another, waving scraps of paper. A man with a pasty complexion grimaced and drew a finger across his throat, making Al wonder how the traders survived day to day without suffering heart failure. He bypassed the elevator and bounded up the stairs.

Ryan’s office was a modern affair: plush white carpets, cabinets and credenzas lacquered black. In a high-back, plush leather executive chair, he

sat behind an oval desk of glass and chrome. He stood, gesturing for Al to sit in one of the client chairs on the other side of his desk.

The frames of the client chairs were thin chrome tubes. The backs, which came to the bottom of Al's shoulder blades, and seats, which angled downward front to back on a forty-five-degree slope, were made of hard black leather stretched taut across the frame. His butt hung over the back of the seat a foot from the floor. He was unable to find a comfortable position for his long legs. When he leaned against the backrest, he had the sensation of sitting on a rollercoaster during a steep ascent.

"You like the chairs?" Ryan said. "I just got them."

"Sure," Al said, squirming, trying to get comfortable. "It's great."

"They're original. Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona design," Ryan said. "Nineteen twenty-nine." He took a cigar from a humidor on his desk. "What's up?"

"Instructions from our auditors."

"Such as, 'Buy Orion Trading?' Tell me, you did buy a bundle, didn't you?"

Al shook his head. "Would that have been legal?"

Ryan sat down, tapped the glass top of his desk with an ornament, a gold-plated screw the size of a knockwurst. "When I faxed you the press release, the news was public. That's when you were supposed to buy. Now the stock's up three bucks. A goddamn mother lode— black gold."

He sniffed his cigar. "Cuban," he said, clipping off an end. "Hand-rolled Bolivar. Want one?"

He clipped the end of another cigar, handed it to Al. Al lit and then drew on the cigar, the smoke cool and smooth in his throat, and exhaled. "Nice. How do you get these?"

"Amaro, concierge at the *Georges Cinq*."

"Where's that?"

"Paris. *Avenue Georges Cinq* off the *Champs-Élysées*— say! Where do you get yours?"

Al crossed his legs; his rear end slid farther off the chair. "Cubans? I mean— What does one of those cost? Fifty dollars?"

Ryan opened a door behind his desk, revealing a walk-in closet. On the floor were cases of Chateau Lafite Rothschilds, Chateau Latours, and Dom Pérignon. He rummaged through shelves, then returned to his desk. "Take

this.” It was an unopened box of Cuban Bolivar Royals. Al demurred but Ryan insisted.

Al said, “Indonesian banks won’t verify the source of the funds transferred by wire.”

“What’s that got to do with us?”

“We have to file Treasury Department cash-deposit reports,” Al said.

“Arthur Andersen thinks we’re paid cash in Indonesia for crude oil?” Ryan laughed. “Imagine the logistics. Japanese freighters steaming into Jakarta, their holds filled with cash to pay for the oil we ship back to Osaka. You pay these clowns by the hour to come up with these brainstorm?”

“It must be a precaution.”

“You buy that crap?” Ryan said, his voice low, guttural. “More reports? Bureaucracy is the enemy of capitalism.” Then his tone lightened. “You want a truly bitchin port?”

“I better not. It’s only two.”

Ryan opened a teak *cav d’ licquor* on the credenza behind his desk, removed a Lalique decanter with opaque owls cut into the crystal. He filled two matching glasses. “It cleanses your palate.” He nodded to Al and raised his glass before taking a sip.

Al sipped the wine and smiled.

“I get it from Douro, a ’48.” Ryan swirled the wine in his glass. “Do you have any idea what it’s like?”

“Douro?”

“Dealing with accountants.”

“Well, of course, in banking—”

“Those pencil necks suck up my life. I hope Hailey appreciates your banking hours.”

“That’s an unfortunate misnomer about bankers.”

“Misconception,” Ryan said.

“A what?”

“No offense, really. I know you work until five on Fridays, but putting aside my personal burdens, let me ask you this. Should I saddle my shareholders with this expense just to create more billable hours for the accountants?”

“It’s the bank’s expense.”

“It’s bank robbery. Treasury reports?” Ryan topped off Al’s glass. “Aren’t those IRS red flags?”

“Well, when you were audited last year, you got a refund.”

“Coopers used the wrong depreciation tables for our Manhattan properties,” Ryan said. “Now I have to sell the Chrysler Building.” His jaw clenched. “Depreciation recapture! *Capisce?*”

“No thank you,” Al said, sipping from his wineglass.

“When escrow closes next week, the liquid equity pays taxes and interest. I won’t see a dime for a year, maybe two.”

“I’m sorry,” Al said. “That’s a tough one to swallow.”

Ryan tossed his lighter to Al. “Accountants make lawyers look good,” he said.

“What can we do?” Al said.

“I can recommend competent regional CPAs,” Ryan said.

“Even if we could fire our accountants during an audit, I couldn’t make that—”

Ryan raised a hand; his eyes closed. The intercom buzzed. He unplugged the phone.

Al’s calf muscles seized. He massaged the spasms.

Five minutes later Ryan said, “You think about the big picture?”

“Of course.”

“I wanted to be a philosopher, but my father’s dream was to have me work with him. ‘Go to Wharton, get an MBA,’ he said. It was my sister who was interested in business. But dad said women don’t have a head for figures.”

“But, but,” Al stuttered. “Antigone’s got a doctorate in evolutionary biology.”

“Go figure,” Ryan said, drumming his fingers on his glass desktop, keeping time to a tune only he could hear. “Banking wasn’t my first choice, either. Every god damned day. Meetings with morons. Instead of choking some anal retentive, I fantasize about exit strategies.”

Al shifted uneasily.

“I need a sabbatical,” Ryan said, “But with dad gone, who would run the shop?”

“Must be a terrible burden,” Al said.

“What would Dad have thought of me if I lost the business? That’s why I imagine worst-case scenarios, life being so risky.”

“When Jacob was born, we bought life insurance.”

“Exactly. And insurance would cover some of our losses if one of our tankers went down. But what if the geologists had been wrong and we hadn’t struck oil in Indonesia? I’d have lost everything except the trading company and the real estate. And let me share something with you. If my South African partners don’t keep the diamond glut under control, well, the trading company is kaput. Nothing left but my inheritance and trust funds.”

“But you—”

“Think of it this way. Where would you be without your book of business? An assistant branch manager? Unlikely. You and me, my friend, we’re already thirty, too old to start over in the business world. We’d do volunteer work.”

Al puffed his cigar, watched Ryan through the smoke.

“You following?” Ryan said. His face set, hard, resolute.

“I see your point about the accountants,” Al said, “and I want to assure you that our issues with them won’t become your problem.”

“First American?” Ryan said. “Does that name offend my overseas partners?”

“Cash-deposit reports don’t apply to wire transfers. I’ll get a legal opinion if I have to.”

Ryan said, “We’ll buy a controlling interest in the bank. What do you think of the name First Global?”

Al held on to Ryan’s desk for the leverage he needed to extract himself from the chair. “It’s ambitious,” he said, making the transition to his feet.

“You have vision,” Ryan said. “You’ll be president of the bank one day.”

President of the bank. The words echo. *No*, he wants to say. *No, not me.*

Aurora says, “Was Ryan Hunter behind the money laundering?”

He blinks twice.

There’s a knock on the door. A middle-aged man—a paunch, fringe of wiry hair, tie dangling below a collar to small to button, a name tag that says, GERALD KLEIN, MD, CHIEF OF NEUROLOGY—and several younger men, and a woman, wearing coats and stethoscopes around their necks walk in.

“You’ll have to leave, Miss,” he says.

“You’re not Mr. Rosen’s doctor,” Aurora says.

Klein looks at his watch. "This is a teaching hospital, and I'm on a tight schedule."

"Me too," Aurora says. She towers over Klein, shows him her badge. "Want to have a conversation about obstruction of justice?"

The door opens and two men wearing gray suits and military-style haircuts walk in. One of the men stands protectively near Aurora. "Everything okay in here, Ms. Goldin?" he says.

As the doctors file out of the room, Al imagines Klein trying to persuade hospital security to confront the FBI agents who work with Aurora.

Aurora turns on a projector. She must have set it up while he'd been enveloped in memories of the day Ryan told him that Orion Trading would buy the bank. She has moved his bed so that he can see lights flicker on the wall. "Four days ago," she says.

In the auditorium of the First Global Enterprises Building, Ryan, tanned, his blond hair, now graying at the temples, pulled into a pony tail, looking fit, stepped to a microphone. "I have a statement," he said, "then I'll take questions." He looked at notes. "When the bank was placed in receivership, we didn't know why. Now we do."

He reads: "For the past twenty years, J. Alfred Rosen, president of the bank, ran clandestine operations, instructing our branches in Jakarta to accept more than thirty billion dollars in cash deposits. The money was wired to several of our Florida branches for deposit into accounts owned by limited partnerships in the Cayman Islands. To our surprise, Al Rosen was the general partner."

He crushed the notes. "The cash was dirty, proceeds of narcotic sales. Questions?"

Hands raised. Ryan pointed to a man in the back of the room. "Kermit?"

Kermit Ross, his closely cropped hair and mustache gone gray, stood and said, "Al Rosen would no sooner be mixed up in drugs than you or I."

"I trusted him with my father's legacy," Ryan says.

"We don't know Al's side of the story."

"I didn't believe it either until I read his plea agreement signed and under oath, how he did it, his Swiss bank accounts— excuse me." Ryan looked away.

"That so? There's got to be more to it," Kermit said. "I don't know what." Chairs scraped, people fidgeted, throats cleared. "The bank's stock is

three cents,” Kermit said. “Wipes out our 401(k)s. Our salaries are cut twenty percent, health insurance canceled. Dolores has breast cancer—”

“I didn’t know,” Ryan said.

“Now, I’m askin’—”

“Coach!” Ryan said, holding up a hand.

“Ryan,” Kermit said, raising his voice. “I’m talking to you.”

“Sorry. I can’t do anything about the receiver. She’s getting rich mismanaging the bank. I’ve set up a fund with two hundred fifty thousand dollars to help bank employees with special circumstances.”

“What will two-hundred-thousand dollars do for eight-hundred employees?”

“I wish I could do more. I can’t. Carolyn has tied up our assets in court.”

Ryan pauses; the room is silent.

“Sorry to hear about your troubles, but the stock of the parent company is flying high—”

“Coach, I’m going to call you,” Ryan said. “FGE’s vice president for human resources, Ted Court, will take further questions.”

Aurora sits beside Al. He sees her take his hand. “Even if he loses the bank and Carolyn gets everything she’s asking for in the divorce, Ryan Hunter will still be a billionaire and Kermit and Dolores Ross will have nothing after a lifetime of work: no retirement, no health insurance, no dignity.”

Veins bulge on his forehead, his eyelids twitch, pain burns behind his eyes. He closes them.

He was thirteen, holding his mother’s hand at his father’s funeral. Across the lake the carousel ponies turned around and around.

Andy’s mother – her sweet face gaunt, ravaged by the chemotherapy she can no longer afford – says, “If we could seize Ryan Hunter’s money . . .”

He slogs through a marsh surrounding the lake, walks on firmer ground past the carousel to a corral, a stable, a stallion.

He opens his eyes.

He blinks once, saying yes, an affirmation of faith transcending complexities beyond his comprehension.

Aurora's eyes glisten.
He closes his eyes.

He trots the stallion around the corral, brings him to a canter, jumps a fence and gallops toward a shallow sea galloping toward singing mermaids riding seaward on the waves becoming one with the steed galloping in the sizzling South Florida heat sssst

A Friend of the Devil

My psychiatrist says that my memory was psychically impaired when I learned that my husband Al had suffered a brainstem stroke. But in no way have my memories been diminished. They are, in fact, vivid, distinct, reliable.

My psychiatrist insists, however, that what I describe isn't memory but paramnesia. What she fails to understand is that surreal doesn't mean unreal.

Al's doctors say that his ability to think, to remember, is intact. He'd been athletic, handsome, but now he's a man trapped in a body in atrophy with a face frozen in a visage of horror, a Dorian Gray transformation, a Kafkaesque portrayal of mind-body duality.

What is he feeling? Heartbreak? Fear? Panic? What is he thinking? Of loss? Of the past or what's happening in the present? Of what his life could have been?

For twenty years we were lovers, best friends, my husband and I. We were so close I believed I knew his thoughts and feelings. But now I can only imagine; I can wish; I can guess.

I must have been with him when it happened. Probably because the trauma of shock, fright, the only thing I don't remember is the last few hours of that night. My last memory of that day is seeing my father, dead just six months, standing in our home on the cantilevered landing above the foyer, standing next to Al.

When our sixteen-year-old son, Jacob, and his best friend, Pierre, one of my honors English students, came home late that night, they found Al paralyzed on the landing. I was asleep and don't remember waking up, the paramedics, the hospital.

Since the stroke, I've felt guilty. What if the paramedics had arrived earlier? Maybe after Al collapsed I blithely stepped over him, drew a bath, and took a sleeping pill. Maybe, as Rose Kennedy is rumored to have done, I watched my husband suffer a stroke and then went out to play nine holes of golf.

There are so many possibilities, but no one blames me: not the doctors, not Jacob, not Al.

Nothing – not mood elevators or stabilizers, soporifics or stimulants, booze or pot, or even selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors – has helped.

Tomorrow, I'm going back to work, back to my students, back to my classroom, stepping back into the world where it all began, a world where I don't know what I'll do or to whom I'll do it.

The day of Al's stroke, my students were discussing *The Great Gatsby* while I was thinking about redecorating the classroom, replace the posters of Hemingway and Fitzgerald with posters of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein.

My attention returned to the classroom discussion when Pierre said, "Except for Wilson, every character in *Gatsby* was a liar."

"What about Nick Carraway?" I said.

I didn't hear his answer because the next moment I was twenty-eight again, with my best friends, Phoebe and Aurora, in Miami Beach, window shopping for a wedding ring for Al, deciding which one to purchase before I proposed to him.

Aurora, black curls clipped behind her ear, said, "If you marry Al it will ruin your life."

I looked to Phoebe for support, but she just played with her innocent blonde pigtails.

One of my students said, "Nick Carraway didn't lie."

Although I'd never experienced the present momentarily becoming the past, I didn't feel caught between alternate realities. Reliving one of Aurora's fierce admonitions of twenty years ago was disturbing but understandable. After all, what is consciousness if not a dialog between the past, the present, and the future? What are memories and dreams if not an expression of the speed of life?

Across the quad, beyond the four-tier Mediterranean fountain, birds of paradise, roses, and bottlebrush bordering the science building bloomed in a palette of colors. Below the beveled cornice of its art deco façade was the classroom where my father had taught for thirty-eight years.

He was lecturing – "Using light emitted from solids and gases will help you understand the quantizing of the energy in atoms"; coaching baseball – "Step forward with your front foot when you swing the bat"; tutoring Hebrew – "The vowels are a crutch; we're throwing them away."

Then I was on a Key Largo beach watching children building a sand castle. Swimming into the ocean, a powerful undercurrent drew me underwater toward the ocean floor. I struggled, inhaled seawater, felt certain I would drown. My father lifted me to the surface. From far away, as if in a dream, I heard an echo: “Nick Carraway was in love with Jordan Baker.”

Victor, one of my students, diligent but unattuned to the nuances of truth, was arguing with Pierre. “Carraway was *not* in love with Jordan Baker,” Victor said, flipping through the book. “Here, right here on page 57: ‘I wasn’t actually in love with her.’”

Pierre said, “*Actually?*”

Victor said, “Why would he lie?”

Gesturing with power and precision, like the athlete he was, like the surgeon he hoped to become, Pierre said, “He can admit he was attracted to Jordan Baker’s hard, jaunty body, but he can’t admit he was in love with a liar and a cheat in a story he’s telling about the consequences of adultery.”

“You’re delusional,” Victor said, the veins of his neck bulging. “That’s why you cut your wrists.” He jabbed a page with his forefinger. “Carraway says, ‘I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known!’”

“There you have it,” Pierre said, his hands in his lap. “According to Gertrude—”

“Who is Gertrude?” I said.

“Hamlet’s mother,” Pierre said. “Nick Carraway protests too much.”

In the parking lot, where I thought I’d left the Buick, I was astonished to see my Triumph— a 1962 British racing-green TR3b, a gift from my father, who’d bought it new. I rarely drove it before he died and hadn’t driven it since, though I loved its baroque grace and detested the boxy designs of the later models: Bauhaus tributes to conformity, counterstatements to free love.

Driving north on Brickell Avenue under banyan and oak canopies, on my way to meet Aurora and Phoebe at the Chocolate Carousel – an upscale coffee shop in the Collins Hotel with a semicircular rear wall of floor-to-ceiling glass offering panoramas of Vizcaya and the Key Biscayne Bridge and a rotating floor making a complete turn every ninety minutes – I fantasized about Al kissing me, stroking my thighs, tracing the outline of my open lips with his fingertips, his tongue, the sound of my dress

unzipping. His hand moving slowly down my spine as I unbuckled his belt, hot breath on my neck. I unbuttoned his shirt.

A convertible, its top down, drew abreast of the Triumph, Aurora, tapping her steering wheel as if it were a bongo, her hair shaking like a pompom, “Somebody to Love” blaring from her car’s speakers. The soundtrack segued into the next song, “My Best Friend.” She blew a kiss and accelerated.

As the moderne crown of the Du Pont Building came into view, I followed Aurora onto a road that wound its way around marshes of sawgrass and past a flock of flamingos— some on one foot with beaks bowed as if praying, others stepping delicately through the water. We drove into a parking structure and circled up the ramps to the roof, where no one else was in sight.

She wore her federal-prosecutor uniform, a pinstriped navy suit. When she stepped out of her car, her suit jacket was unbuttoned. The frills on her silk blouse did little to conceal the contour of what was beneath. She pressed against me, caressing my breasts with hers, then covering my mouth with hers. Sucking on my tongue, she lifted my dress, slipping fingers under my panties.

“You’re already wet,” she said.

I leaned against her. “I’m having unusual experiences,” I said.

She said, “Something happen between you and Al?”

“Nothing’s changed.”

“Would you feel differently if he were cheating?”

A shortness of breath. “Are you saying he’s seeing someone?” I said.

“No,” Aurora said. “But if you were free—”

“I’m not,” I said, taking her hand. “And we agreed, we’re not doing this.”

We crossed an opalescent marble mandala in the lobby of the Collins and went into The Chocolate Carousel. The place had the feel of a Disneyland confectionary with a cruise ship décor. Speedboats pulled water-skiers over the bay just beyond the glass wall where Phoebe was waiting.

“I love this place,” Phoebe said. “The fleurs-de-lis in the wrought iron are to die for.”

Aurora said, “Hailey’s having strange experiences.”

“Who isn’t?” Phoebe said, fanning herself with a menu.

Our server appeared— six-two, dreadlocks, wide-eyed. “Aurora Goldin!” he said.

“Greg Pardo?”

“Craig, but my name is Mohammad now.”

“Was it two kilos?” Aurora said.

“I’m sober twelve years.”

“Congratulations!” she said. Then she ordered a Café Diablo with a double Kahlua straight up and a shot of tequila.

“Can you get that here?” I said.

“You can get anything you want,” Mohammad said. “But I’ll have to see your ID.”

“You want my phone number too?” Aurora said.

Mohammad brought the Kahlua and an oversized shot glass filled to the brim with tequila. He set down a mug of steaming coffee, then using a paring knife he sliced off the skin of an orange in a continuous swirl. He poured heated brandy down the spiral of the peel, then lit a match. Flames twirled down the peel, igniting the surface of the coffee.

Aurora downed the tequila. “Al’s bank puts up its overseas clients here?” she said.

The rotating floor brought us adjacent to the lobby. Its columns were made of the same marble used in the mandala. Flower-and-leaf motifs were carved into the Corinthian capitals. Guards stood near a traveling exhibition of Jackson Pollack paintings. The paint liquefied, lapping at the frames like roiling waves.

Pointing, I grabbed Phoebe’s arm.

“Every piece is a Louis XIV,” she said. “Makes you feel as if you’re in Versailles.”

“Not the furniture,” I said. “The paintings—”

“What are they worth?” Aurora said. “Eight figures each?”

A girl, ten or eleven, held a cage with a white rabbit. The rabbit winked, opened the cage door, leapt to the floor, jumped into a painting, and sank beneath molten yellows and greens.

“Did you see that?” I said. “The rabbit?”

“He’s cute,” Phoebe said.

The rabbit, reincarnated, was back in its cage. An apparition, my doppelganger, joined us.

“I was unfaithful,” my ghostly counterpart said.

“You were?” Phoebe said.

I couldn’t speak, but my guilt-ridden stand-in said, “I fell in love, but it’s over now.”

Love— that bitter mystery. Why was I sad? Hadn’t I resolved my feelings for Aurora long ago?

Phoebe said, “You wouldn’t have fallen in love with another man if you were fulfilled.”

“Al’s my best friend,” I said. “If he found out, think of his pain.”

I thought about ordering a drink.

Phoebe held my hand. “This is between us,” she said. She looked at Aurora for an affirmation.

Aurora finished her Kahlua; her face was florid. She’s made eye contact with a good-looking man, a swarthy complexion, a tropical suit, sipping a drink, sitting in the lobby. She slouched, uncrossed her legs, opened them, closed her eyes. Smiled.

“He wants me,” she said.

Phoebe nodded to Mohammad and reached for her purse. “I’ll get the check.”

When Mohammad returned, Aurora said, “Did *you* know that marijuana puts holes in children’s brains? I shoulda asked for the death penalty! You shoulda been shot!”

Aurora’s flirting companion, the tropical suit, approached. “May I be of assistance?” he said.

Mohammad said, “Thanks but we’ve got this.” He helped me help Aurora to her feet.

“C’mon,” I said. “I’m taking you home.”

In the parking lot I said, “That was disgraceful.”

Aurora said nothing.

“You’ve got to come to terms,” I said. “Alcohol isn’t your friend.”

“What’s a friend?” Aurora said, still slurring her words.

About a mile down the road Aurora said, “I have a friend, a lawyer I want you to call.”

I pulled into a 7-Eleven parking lot. The Triumph sputtered, then coughed.

“The idle is set too low,” she said. I turned off the engine.

“I’m not supposed to know—” She slumped in her seat. “I’ll get fired. Maybe I should resign.”

“When you’re through feeling sorry for yourself, tell me what the hell you’re talking about!”

“On Monday a receiver’s gonna take over First Global.”

“Al knows?”

“It’s all his fault.”

“Bad loans?”

“The law— Federal— Oh, damn it. Hailey, it was— he was money laundering.”

Her words reverberated like mallets on timpani.

“No,” I said. “He couldn’t— never—”

“And racketeering,” Aurora said. “He did it. Massively. And justish . . .”

My gut cramped; I began to cry. “Drug money?”

“Your father woulda spared us a prosecution. He woulda strangled Al,” Aurora said.

“Your lawyer friend can help him?”

“She can help you.” Aurora looked at her watch. “Go to the bank. After six, you don’ have any money— it’s all frozen.”

“What about Jacob?”

Aurora was crying too. “Al is evil,” she said. “We just didn’t know.”

My mascara streaked, my lips quivered. I leaned into Aurora, felt the crush of her silk blouse.

“I’ve always loved you,” Aurora said.

I thought of the people I’d loved: my grandparents, Dad, Mom, Al, Jacob, Phoebe, Aurora. Among the billions of people who’d lived in my lifetime; these were the ones I’d loved. I drew Aurora’s face to mine, kissed her deeply for a very long time. “I’ve always loved you, too.” I said.

I was baking brownies when Jacob and Pierre came into the kitchen.

“I’m going to kill Victor,” Jacob said.

“Who cares?” Pierre said. “He’s a troglodyte.”

I took a baking pan out of the oven. “Are you taking your lithium?” I said to Pierre.

Pierre said, “When I don’t take it, I’m smart. I can play baseball. When I take it, I’m clumsy, I get fat, I’m not smart. The devil lives in my brain.”

I wrapped two brownies in tinfoil and put them in the refrigerator.

Al stood in the foyer holding his briefcase in one hand, his suit jacket in the other, looking lost. His eyes were swollen.

I put his briefcase in the entryway closet.

“You know?” he said.

“I made brownies.”

I sat with him at the kitchen table, looking out at the pool, the gardens, and *The Octopus*, his two-million-dollar sport yacht, bobbing between its docks on Biscayne Bay. The yard lights came on.

“May I have more milk?” he said

“That’s all we have,” I said.

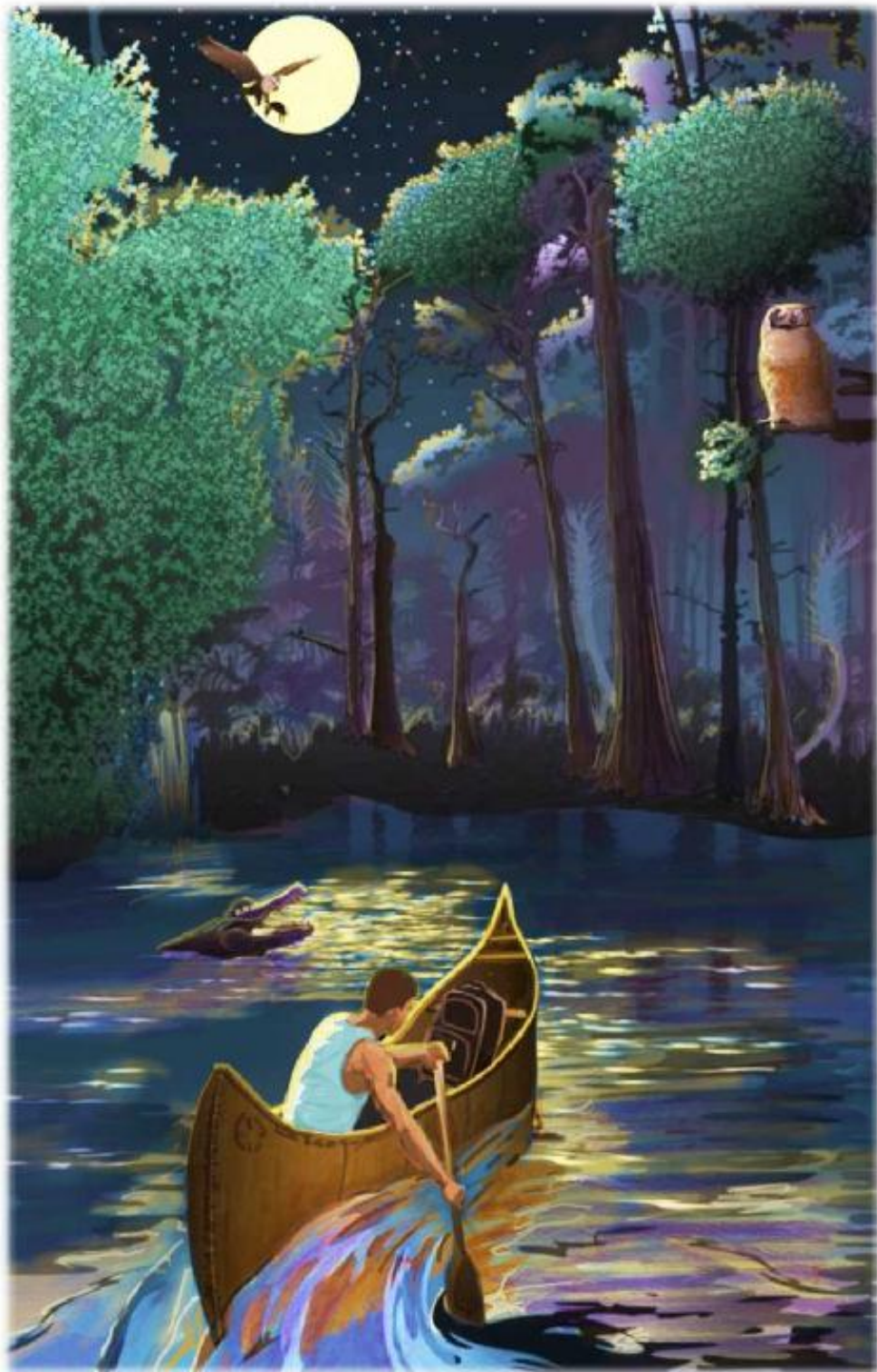
“Hailey,” he said. “There were these technical violations—”

“Take me upstairs,” I said. I cleared the dishes, then walked into the foyer. Al stood at the top of the staircase looking funereal. My father stood beside him.

I heard a sound – Zip – like a pop, like something snapping shut.

Or was there a sound?

Part VII The Circle of Jupiter



A Warped Side of the Universe

Sarah Abiaka says, “It’s a miracle you survived your birth.”

She and her great-grandson, Andrew, who is nineteen, are in her study in her home in Tallahassee, where she and her husband of fifty years, Marcus Kayalu, have adjoining offices, each with a generous picture window showcasing a vista of verdant woodlands unfolding and streams flowing into the lake adjoining their backyard, lapping at its shores.

Because Andrew’s college is in Tallahassee, he and his great-grandparents have spent a lot of time together during the three years it’s taken him to earn his baccalaureate. He’s become especially close to them, admiring each of them for their character and accomplishments. But he cannot comprehend how two people as different as they are could have married, let alone stayed married for a half century. Always contradicting each other, quibbling if not quarreling.

When he asked his great-grandpapa what contributed most to the success of his long-term marriage, Marcus said, “Love,” hesitated, then added, “and a gigantic helping of luck.”

Sarah said, “It was The Creator’s will.”

It is mid-May. Under a clear morning sky, sunlight pours over the sweet lake waters and glittering brown-and-red marshes, home to hundreds of bird and reptile nests that flourish within and around the lake. An American alligator, twenty to twenty-five years old judging by its twelve-foot length, rugged-leather armor reticulating along its back and tail in two rows of serrated ridges in the form of sawlike teeth, looking exactly like its ancestors did one-hundred-fifty-million years ago, basks in gray-green mud. Turtles on the endangered- and-threatened-species lists – Suwanee cooters with their vulnerable yellow-and-black-polka-dot undersides and yellow-striped mud turtles – sun themselves on smooth stones and rotting logs jutting from the shore into the water. Wading birds – white ibis and blue herons – stand still as tombstones in the lake near the shore.

Just what is it about these little swamp birds basking in this lake that sparkles like diamonds that like lives once lived? The birds don’t foreshadow their own deaths to any greater extent than the sight of any living creature is a reminder of its inevitable end; rather the untimely death,

or more precisely the extinction of these species in this locale is foretold by the prolific, herbicide-resistant *Hydrilla verticillata* growing in the lake like a tumor, threatening to choke life from all other flora and the fauna whose existence depends on the waters clogged by these pathogens. Regrettably, locating and identifying a life form that's fatal to other life forms in the ecosystem does not ensure the ability to destroy it.

This is the first time Sarah has talked to Andrew about his birth unlike Marcus talks about it in terms of the physical properties of hurricanes, the atmospheric conditions that spawn them, the salient circumstances the escape from Karl's trailer, Estella prematurely going into labor, Betty Mae delivering him. Marcus immersed himself in paleotempestology, publishing *Epic Tropical Storms: Desolation and Opportunity*, his only book that has earned significant royalties.

Sarah says, "What are the chances that a baby born outdoors in the Everglades during a hurricane—"

"A colossal hurricane," Marcus thunders through the open doorway.

"Would live?" says Sarah.

"How did Seminole women living on chickees do it?" Andrew says.

"Thatched roofs of chickees are lowered to the floor to provide shelter during storms, but no Seminole ever gave birth during a hurricane and survived as you and your mother did."

"How do you know?" Andrew says.

"If it had happened, it would be part of our lore. I'd know," Sarah says. "Hurricane Andrew carried a sign from The Creator of Her grand design for you."

"Good grief," Marcus bellows. "Grand design? Study the stars. Study those damn aquatic weeds polluting our lake. Eradicate them. That would be grand."

What Marcus says makes sense. At nineteen, Andrew is nearing graduation from Florida State University with a double major in literature and philosophy, which qualifies him to do what? There are myriad viable choices, not one of them appealing. He doesn't have to work for a living because of his monthly stipend from the tribe, because of trusts established for him by Marcus and Sarah, and by his grandmamma, Betty Mae. But he wants to make the world a better place. And to do that, he has much more to learn, much more to do.

He could join one of the armed services or the peace corps, go to grad school and pursue a career as an academician, take premed courses and apply to medical school, or worst of all, with due respect and love for his momma, take the LSAT and go to law school. Could there be a profession more boring, more superfluous? He's pinioned by an existential crisis common to others his age. But he's graduating from college years ahead of his peers.

Marcus is urging Andrew to work after graduation as his research assistant for a year, to discover the world through the lens of science.

His mother's boss, Aurora Goldin, suggested that he apply for a one-year internship in the U.S. Attorney's office in Miami. Aurora said that while there were no guarantees, based upon his academic record, she'd be surprised if he wasn't selected for one of the positions. She said it with jollity. Did his momma have a hand in that? She denied it, saying that encouraging him to apply for the internship was strictly Aurora's idea. Is there justice in nepotism or vice versa? Regardless nepotism is unsavory because unearned privilege leads privileged individuals to claim entitlement to privilege, which in turn leads to the inhumanity and corruption bred by the god complexes of those who believe they are chosen for privilege.

And then there is the possibility if not the promise of his becoming a writer. In his first semester, he took a creative writing class and his professor encouraged him to submit short stories to literary journals. And so, mentored by this professor, he devoted a substantial portion of his first two years of college to writing short fiction.

But he hadn't written or submitted anything in the past year. Why? There were many reasons. Among them, the ratio of time expenditure to reward was ridiculously low. But foremost, the process of submitting stories to literary journals was even more repugnant than nepotism.

The submissions policies of most literary journals were idiotic. The one that was most offensive stated: We don't publish anything with talking animals. Would these self-appointed guardians of good taste and literary merit reject Kafka's "Metamorphosis" because the story is told from the point of view of a bug? Would they reject George Orwell's *Animal Farm* because the main characters are talking barnyard animals? Would they reject *The Odyssey* because Odysseus battles a talking Cyclops? What about power animals? Are they banned from literary fiction? The rule against talking animals was just one among many that barred allegory, allusion,

cultural and religious diversity that offended the editors' sense of realism, and banned a sense of humor from the pages of their journals.

There were submission guidelines that proudly announced that the journal did not publish poems about poets or poetry. That ruled out *The Divine Comedy* or any other poem written in the first person. There were rules against stories about writers or writing. And forget it if your story fell within the purview of a recognized genre. No polemic by John Steinbeck or Sinclair Lewis. No science fiction by Doris Lessing. Rules are rules notwithstanding a Nobel Prize in literature.

And so exactly what was the point of writing for these narrow-minded guardians of literature?

The literary-journal route to a career in creative writing was a zero-sum game played with idiots full of sound and fury who signified nothing of literary consequence. If he were going to be a writer, he would follow the example of Melville and Conrad: spend his youth in pursuit of experiences both with and without talking animals that he would want to write about when he was older. He would disregard literary correctness, following the examples of Mark Twain, Margaret Atwood, e e cummings, and Virginia Woolf by self-publishing his early work.

This was why his great-grandmomma—working fulltime as a Seminole medicine woman and sangoma shaman—struck a chord that was harmonious with his own inclinations. She's not offered him a job, not suggested that he pursue shamanism or tribal medicine. Rather she's recommended that he take a year off, travel, explore, discover justice, truth, and love on his own terms in ordinary as well as in hidden reality.

"Can't argue with that advice," Marcus said. "Take a year off. Go to Vienna. Go to Vietnam. Go to the Magellanic Clouds." But Marcus embellished his concurrence with the year-of-discovery plan. "Whatever you decide to do in the coming year," he said, handing Andrew a book, "study chaos theory."

Andrew took the book from his great-grandpapa. "Why chaos?" he said.

"Because," Marcus said, "you'll have to master chaos theory to solve the mystery of the ineffable marriage of quantum mechanics and general relativity."

"Ineffable?" said Andrew. "Like your marriage to great-grandmomma Sarah?"

“Good point but not quite,” Marcus said. “Just as one infinite set can be larger than another, one unfathomable phenomenon can be more ineffable than another.”

Notwithstanding the levity, Marcus detected Andrew’s interest in physics even though he said nothing in response. “When you have time, read the book. It was written by a friend of mine, a retired professor of theoretical physics at Cal Tech a winner of the Nobel Prize in physics.”

“Thanks, great-grandpapa,” Andrew said, looking at the dust jacket that featured an artist’s rendition of colliding black holes. The book was titled *The Warped Side of the Universe*. “I’ll read it after finals.”

That was a month earlier. Andrew took his last final exam the day before. And now Sarah is elaborating on her advice, suggesting something specific, recommending a destination during his year-of-discovery travels. The planet Jupiter. “The physics of hurricanes is well understood,” she says. “This we know because Marcus explains it whenever anyone will listen.” They share a laugh.

Marcus calls out, “Poppycock.”

Sarah says, “Explain poppycock. What’s that? Plant genitalia?”

Andrew smiles but Sarah laughs until she’s out of breath, bringing Andrew and Marcus to laughter.

When her laughter subsides, Sarah says, “Great-grandpapa was onto something when he studied hurricanes. He got the atmospheric right, but what he missed was the metaphysics. The mystical powers of these storms.”

Marcus makes a show of huffing his way through the portal separating Sarah’s study from his.

“Will you knock it off—” He loses his train of thought when he sees Sarah and Andrew poring over his charts of the solar system spread across her desk, charts with calculations he’d carefully recorded in the margins, charts he’d compiled over decades. “Those are mine,” he says. “I’ll not have them used for the ridiculous.”

Sarah points to the largest planet on one of the charts. “Jupiter will be here at the end of the summer. The most magnificent hurricanes in the solar system are there. Visit them then.”

“Why wait until the end of summer?” Andrew says.

“What’s to come of that?” says Marcus, taking his charts. “Jupiter reveals your destiny? *Pull leeze.*”

“Because,” Sarah says, “that’s when the Great Red Spot will be closest to Jupiter’s southern equatorial zone and you want to achieve orbit around Jupiter’s equator.”

“It won’t make any difference when he goes,” Marcus says, storming out of Sarah’s study with his solar-system charts. “Metaphysical forces imbued in the Great Red Spot. Good grief.” He turns in the doorway, to give the impression of expressing an afterthought and says to Andrew, “At least it will give you an experience to write about when you’re older.”

Hurricane Andrew spread death and destruction across the southern Florida peninsula. But it was a lamb compared to the hurricanes that rage incessantly 360 million miles, 40 light minutes from Earth in Jupiter’s exosphere, the layer of its atmosphere farthest from its superheated-fluid metallic hydrogen and helium core. The Jovian high-pressure hurricanes whip methane, hydrogen sulfur, and ammonia gas into anticyclonic jets of winds swirling at speeds of more than four hundred miles per hour over spans of time exceeding three hundred years and have diameters three times greater than Earth’s.

Imagine: a hurricane three times the size of the earth. If hurricanes have meta-forces, it makes sense to study those storms on the surface of Jupiter.

The summer doesn’t go well for Andrew. A few weeks after graduation, he’s camping with his lifelong friend, Billie Bower. Billie is hiking, as he never was able to master travel in hidden reality, and Andrew, who remains behind, is traveling in hidden reality, when he is roused by two Fish and Wildlife officers, a man and a woman.

“You stoned?” the woman demands while the other officer ransacks their belongings.

“We have a camping permit,” Andrew says.

“What’s this?” the man says, holding up a baggie of blue tablets.

Andrew knows nothing of the contents of the baggie taken from Billie’s bedroll. But he remains silent.

“Are they yours?” the man asks, removing handcuffs from his belt.

Of course, they aren’t. Andrew has no interest in drugs, no need or use for them. In recent years he’s admonished Billie about using drugs, hugging him on one occasion, saying: please, please stop. I’d be lost without you in my life. But as he says nothing to the National Park

Rangers, he's arrested and turned over to the local police. And the contents of the baggie? Thirty tablets of LSD.

Billie Bower takes no responsibility for the drugs, and Andrew, adhering to their bond of silence, has his summer of planned travel and exploration begin inauspiciously with incarceration, court appearances, a plea of no contest, a felony conviction, and a court-ordered drug-diversion program for a young man of sterling rectitude who's never taken illegal drugs and never will.

At summer's end, with his legal problems behind him – or so he thinks – traveling in hidden reality with his power animal, Eagle, he projects his consciousness into an orbit of Jupiter's equator intersecting the paths of Io and Europa, two of Gallio's Jovian moons. Close by, Eagle flaps his powerful wings.

Four light years away, two black holes traveling near the speed of light collide, warping the fabric of spacetime by causing it to spiral into a time warp, a tunnel in space, a shortcut through which photons carrying information can travel, in effect, faster than the speed of light from the orbit of one star into the backyard of our solar system. Time travel that turns back the clock ticking off each moment of human life, time travel that turns light back in time.

As it forms, the nascent time warp traps negative-energy-vacuum fluctuations – virtual particles with a negative electrical charge – together with light that emanated from the sun two days before Andrew's orbit of Jupiter.

It isn't until later, when Andrew tells his great-grandpapa in detail about his Jupiter journey, that Marcus theorizes, correctly, that negative-energy-vacuum fluctuations swallowed by the time warp held it open just long enough for the light within it to travel back in the direction from which it came, back in time, back two days short of four years – as Marcus's calculations later show – after that light was reflected from Earth into the arena of the collision of the black holes.

Within seconds, the negative-energy-vacuum fluctuations dissipate to rejoin counterpart twin virtual particles, positive-energy-vacuum fluctuations, in nearby space, causing the time warp to destabilize and collapse. Light trapped in the time warp is released on the opposite side of the solar system near Uranus, light that had traveled almost four years after it left the solar system returns to the solar system two days before it left,

carrying information about the future, although Andrew doesn't discover the actual date until two days later.

In the opposite way that a magnifying glass will focus a beam of light, the time warp causes the light traversing it to defocus. The powerful gravity of the sun, acting like a convex lens, causes the defocused light to resolve, to converge upon its emergence from the time warp as it speeds across the solar system toward Jupiter.

Five hours later, the light beams from the future now returning to the sun come within the gravitational pull of Jupiter, where Andrew is observing molecular clouds of methane, ammonia, and chlorine gasses racing in colorful bands of high-speed jet streams in opposite directions around the planet in zonal bands parallel to its equator. Jupiter's gravity, acting as a gravitational lens as the sun's gravity had, again bends the light from the future, fine tuning and further focusing it and projecting it onto the surface of its fourth largest and second closest moon, Europa, a frozen lake of ice – smooth, flat, and white like the supersized screen of an IMAX theater– and it's there, playing out in the flickering light, like scenes from an old-time black-and-white movie, that Andrew sees something that causes him to experience a near-crippling blow to his solar plexus: scenes of a man he recognizes, a man he's recently met – bucked teeth, blond hair pulled back into a ponytail – raping his momma.

Furiously, Eagle beats his wings, flying swiftly toward Europa. But before the great bird can reach noxious images, they are gone.

Obviously, this tragedy hasn't happened. Not yet, and not if he can stop it.

What do these images of horror have to do with his destiny, his birth? He has no idea. And so he immediately returns to ordinary reality and sets out to find his great-grandmomma.

The Loxahatchee River, river of turtles in Muscogee – from its embayment in the Jupiter Inlet that empties into the Atlantic to its sources seven-and-a-half miles upstream as the osprey flies – meanders through mangrove swamps, pine uplands and scrub, hardwood hammocks and sawgrass beds, carving a shape like an Arabic letter or a Sanskrit numeral in the marshlands of Palm Beach and Martin Counties.

Taking care not to violate the curfew imposed by the terms of his probation, Andrew set out for the mouth of the Loxahatchee soon after

returning to ordinary reality from his orbit around Jupiter and he's arrived shortly before the last glimmer of dusk fades from the western skies. He's brought his canoe and provisions he'll need for a two- or-three-day camping trip in the wilderness.

On a night well-lit by a full moon, he launches his canoe. Hours later, not far from the site where Seminole warriors stopped advances of the United States Army during the 1837-38 battles of the Loxahatchee, where the river is no more than fifteen feet wide and no more than five miles from the Atlantic, he pulls his canoe onto the river bank, keeping his distance from an American crocodile plying the dark waters. He's trying to find Sarah and Marcus.

Every year at summer's end, for as long as he can remember, his great-grandmomma has left her home in Tallahassee and returned for three weeks to the land where she was raised. A remote place off the electric-power grid with no cellphone reception. She travels with acolytes, women only, and they live on chickees, studying shamanism and tribal medicine and Seminole culture. During some years, great-grandpapa Marcus or grandmomma Betty Mae have also traveled to the retreat with Sarah. Marcus has taken the trip with Sarah this year. Betty Mae is at a conference in Geneva, and Andrew wasn't able to reach her before he had to leave Miami for Jupiter, Florida. And so he doesn't know exactly where Sarah and Marcus are. He only knows that to reach the site of Sarah's yearly retreat, she travels up the Loxahatchee on her journey to her ancestral home south of Lake Okeechobee.

The evening sky twinkles with stars; Venus and Jupiter are visible to the naked eye. The moon is full, the sky cloudless. The soprano hoots of a Great Horned Owl sound nearby. A peregrine falcon, usually a diurnal bird of prey, crashes into a ring-necked duck on the river bank, then flaps its wings, carrying its meal over treetops into the dark heart of the wetlands. An occurrence of the food chain's eternal return.

Is history somehow to blame for what he saw on Europa? Blame history for the future? Isn't that how it's supposed to work? Hegelian dialectics: as great-grandmomma Betty Mae would say.

What must he do to change the future, interrupt its plans? His great-grandmomma sent him into Jupiter's orbit, and so it must be she who knows the answer. But he hasn't spoken to her since his arrest, and he hopes she isn't too angry with him to speak to him now.

He's banked the canoe so he can carry it upstream a ways, past a barrier of rapids. When the canoe is out of the water, in a pine ridge near the riverbank, a woman appears atop an American saddlebred, a golden stallion with a black mane and tail. She is about fifty and wears buckskin leggings, a purple-and-red-patterned Seminole dress tied at her waist, hemmed with white fringed lace that covers the buckskin at her mid-calf. Her hair falls to her shoulders in gray braids held in place by a twisted leather headband. Her hand rests on a holstered semiautomatic rifle, a Winchester .308.

"Hunting?" she says in Muscogee, in a smoker's raspy voice.

He answers in Muscogee. "And you are?"

"Poaching?" she says.

"You're Fish and Game?" he says.

She doesn't answer, so he slips into his backpack, preparing to portage the canoe.

She dismounts, holding her rifle.

She isn't going to shoot him. He's seen himself unharmed in the near future. Small consolation. Escape into the woods. If she follows him, he'll circle back, take her horse. He darts, but she's quicker. She trips him, and he falls. Slowly, he turns on to his back to face her.

"What's your name?" she says.

"Andrew Good-Eagle Godfrey."

She extends a hand, helps him to his feet. "Pleased to meet you Andrew Good-Eagle."

"Good-Eagle is my middle name," he says, studying her.

"Come with me," she says, retrieving the rifle she dropped, mounting her horse.

He doesn't move. "What's What do you want?" he says.

"Are you indeed free of God, God free?" she says. "You are not God free. Get rid of that name. It dishonors you. Now come. Andrew Good-Eagle," she says, this time sternly. "I'm Castillo, one of Sarah's acolytes. Andrew Good-Eagle is the name of her great-grandson. That's you, right? You must be looking for Sarah. I'll take you to her."

The savory aroma of rabbit stew steams from a large pot filled on a cooking chickee, awakening Andrew's hunger. But he refuses food, saying he'll eat after his conversation with Sarah and Marcus, who sit with him on their own chickee nearby. Their shadows dance in light cast by campfires.

On other chickees, preparations are made for the Green Corn Dance that will be held that fall. They are in a restored, ancient Seminole village in a generic-undeveloped wilderness of southeast Florida, its perimeter patrolled by armed women on horseback.

Rapid. Explicit. Distinct. That's how the images appeared, that's how he describes them, the scenes he saw on Europa assaulting him like a runaway freight train hurtling at full speed on a collision course with grievous harm. Or worse. There was nothing to hold on to. The images were there, and then they were gone. The culprit is a man, mid-twenties, blond ponytail, buck teeth: Jan van Keet. At first Andrew was in a place he didn't recognize, looking at an ornate punch bowl filled with diamonds. Then he was watching van Keet raping his momma.

Andrew tells the story, feeling as if he's in a trance. When he momentarily stops to catch his breath, Sarah and Marcus immediately quarrel, and their disagreements quickly become acrid.

Sarah says, "It's the future—"

"That," Marcus says, rising and then stomping around on their chickee, "is impossible!"

"Are you saying that it's impossible to see the future?" says Sarah, who also gets to her feet.

Marcus says, "Extra-terrestrial light cannot display a scene like a video camera."

"Maybe not in ordinary reality," Sarah says, taking a menacing step toward Marcus. "But Andrew wasn't in ordinary reality."

"Good grief," Marcus says. "The equations of general relativity—"

"Stop!" says Andrew. "It has to be the future because it hasn't happened yet. I met this man, van Keet, three weeks ago. He's a friend of my friend Billie Bower."

Marcus says, "It could have been an optical illusion, a dream."

"It wasn't murky or vague or nuanced like a dream," Andrew says.

"I remember Billie," Sarah says. "A Seminole, a big boy."

"Billie and van Keet met me at momma's condo on their way to a hunting trip," Andrew says. "They invited me along. So I took momma's Glock, the one that belonged to her father. We had a good time. Billie was working for van Keet. Van Keet gave me a job."

Sarah offers Andrew tea, but he declines. She sits next to him on the floor of the chickee.

“Is van Keet going to do this? Because if he is, I’ll kill him now,” Andrew says.

Sarah’s chickee, the entire compound glows in purple light. The women on the other chickees stop talking, stop what they’re doing, stare at Sarah, Marcus, and Andrew.

Eagle beats his mighty wings, sending currents of cool air that envelop Andrew.

When the purple light fades, Marcus says, “Although we can’t see the future, we can predict it. Everything is based on probabilities. But most of the time, when the laws of physics are applied, the probability of predicting what will happen is so close to 100% that we have no hesitation to base a prediction on the result of cause and effect. Do you remember Newton’s second and third laws of motion?”

“Not really,” says Andrew.

“It’s like this,” Marcus says. “If you hit a baseball with a baseball bat, you can determine its acceleration. And if you know the rate of acceleration, you can find the amount of force used to hit the ball. This is because you know the mass of the ball. You following this?”

“No,” says Andrew.

“It’s poppycock,” Sarah says. She giggles.

Marcus ignores her. “Once I know the variables, using differential equations I can calculate in any given moment where the ball will be in the next moment; I’ll see where the ball will be in the future.”

“I wouldn’t recognize a differential equation if I saw one,” Andrew says.

“If you want to lead an examined life, you have to understand reality. And to do that—”

“Marcus!” Sarah says. “Cut the calculus lecture.” She says to Andrew, “All you need to know is that your great-grandpapa Bolëk saw the future and so have other shamans over the millennia, and he told me about it. And they couldn’t change the future.”

“That doesn’t mean that someone else couldn’t,” Andrew says.

“Your great-grandmamma is correct, you can’t change the future,” Marcus says.

Sarah insists, “You cannot change the future.”

“I just agreed with you,” Marcus says.

“You did?” Sarah says. She hugs Marcus. “Your great-grandpapa is so clever.”

“Great-grandpapa is brilliant,” Andrew says. “That’s obvious. But we haven’t agreed that you can’t change the future.”

Marcus says, “Well as for seeing it, you’ve heard my proof. I can know the future, see it if you will, because I know how fast the baseball will travel, where it will land. Now for being able to change the future, once the baseball is hit—”

“What if there’s a sudden gust of wind, or a bird flies into the path of the baseball,” says Andrew.

“Excellent thinking,” Marcus says. “You do have a scientific mind. Of course the facts I gave you, that I know the mass of the baseball, the mass of the bat, and the acceleration of the bat at the time it hits the baseball, are just a few variables among many. I’d have to know, and could know, every source of mass, which is the same as energy, that affects the flight of the baseball, so I can see where it will land.”

“Even if you could know wind speeds, their directions, the humidity, the flight paths of birds and insects and their mass, you still couldn’t see the future – where the ball will travel to –because you don’t take into account human consciousness,” Andrew says.

Marcus considers this, and then says to Andrew, “Consciousness isn’t relevant to this problem because it lacks momentum that could alter the flight of the ball.”

“Suppose,” says Andrew, “that when you hit the baseball, you’re standing on home plate and I’m standing on the first base line holding a high-pressure water gun. If I aim well and pull the trigger at the right moment after you hit the ball, the blast of water will knock the baseball you’ve just hit off course. I could choose to do that or I could choose not to do that. So you wouldn’t be able to see where the ball would land because you can’t read my mind and because I wouldn’t make up my mind – whether or not to pull the trigger – until after you hit the baseball. Determinism isn’t relevant if consciousness is involved.”

“That’s right,” Sarah says. “Only The Creator or a shaman can see the future.”

Marcus says to Andrew, “You asked me what I meant when I said we can see the future. I offered proof. What you’ve done is confuse physical reality with consciousness, argued cogently, for which you are to be commended, that consciousness trumps determinism, if you will. But it doesn’t, you see, because—”

“I meant no disrespect, Great-grandpapa,” Andrew says. “I’m just saying that it wasn’t necessary to use differential equations to see what I saw on Europa.”

“Let’s use logic,” Marcus says. “You saw the future or you didn’t. If you didn’t see the future, we don’t have a problem—”

“But since we can’t know,” Andrew says, “we do have a problem. A huge problem.”

Marcus says, “We agree that the past can’t be changed. If you could change the past, you could negate your own existence. Because the past cannot be changed that the future can’t be changed. It’s because the past causes the future. You’ve heard of the butterfly effect?”

“I’ve heard of it,” Andrew says. “I’m not sure I understand it. It’s discussed in the book you gave me.”

“The classic example,” Marcus says, “is that of a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil, causing a tornado in Texas. It’s an ancient idea. Small changes can have enormous consequences.”

“I understand that,” Andrew says. “Because a nail was lost a horseshoe was lost, so the horse was lost, the rider was lost, the battle was lost, and eventually the kingdom was lost.”

“That’s good,” Sarah says.

Marcus says, “So suppose that when you were circling Jupiter you saw a tornado in Texas in the future. And you wanted to stop it. What would be the easiest way to do that?”

“Stop the butterfly from flapping its wings in Brazil, but I can’t do that because it happened in the past,” Andrew says.

“Exactly,” Marcus says. “If you saw the future, then something has already happened to this man, this van Keet, that will cause him to harm your momma. Changing that would be more complicated than stopping the butterfly from flapping its wings in Brazil, assuming you could even find the exact butterfly that caused the tornado. What happens to a person that would allow them to do what you believe this man is going to do to your momma? He was abused in his youth? Maybe he was raped. Whatever it is, it’s already happened. We can’t change that,” Marcus says.

Sarah and Andrew are silent. Eagle flaps his great wings and flies away.

Marcus says, “But don’t worry, you haven’t seen the future.”

“But suppose he has,” Sarah says. “We’ve agreed he can’t change it.”

“What should I do?” Andrew says. “If I kill van Keet now, he won’t rape momma. But I’d never know if he was going to do it. So I’d never know if I killed an innocent man. How could I live with that?”

“It’s not your fault that you’ve seen the future; it’s not your fault that you cannot change it,” Sarah says. “You will know this is about to happen when you see the bowl filled with diamonds. When that happens, come directly to me. We’ll be here for another week, then we’ll be at home.”

Andrew is silent, grief-stricken, afraid. “Then what?” Andrew says. “Then what do we do?”

Marcus says. “If you have seen the future, come to your great-grandmomma. She’ll know what to do.”

“The first thing we’ll do . . .,” Sarah says—

But Andrew, who has sunk into sorrowful contemplation, is no longer listening.

Perihelion

Georges pilots his silver Tesla – its cabin with concert hall acoustics; its motor as silent as a predator lying in wait; its motor emitting zero hydrocarbons; its seventeen-inch, high-definition, interactive display providing fingertip or voice-recognition access to the car’s controls and amenities; its eight-channel sound system, 3-D navigation, up-to-the-minute weather forecasts, and its web browser everything you’d expect to find in a twenty-first-century worthy successor to Colonel Gabriel Verus’s mid-twentieth century Cadillac with spaceship fins, a machine that would have made its namesake, Nicola Tesla proud – to the far end of the parking lot of the Sunshine Sanatorium, a psychiatric hospital in South Miami, a sprawling ranch-style structure tucked in to and encircled by vast curtilage of walkways, fountains and benches, tropical shrubs, and beds of flowering bushes: lavender azaleas and trumpet flowers; blood-orange flowering quince; single, double, and triple hibiscuses, red and white; magnolia stellar stars; and roses. Three yellow-clay walkways radiate at sixty-degree angles from the hospital entrance through the gardens to the parking lot. Red, pink, and white floribundas climb coved trellises that arch over the walkways. Hybrid T bushes with a show of ubiquitous blooms, the colors of the roses climbing the trellises, grow uniformly in manicured beds planted between the clay walkways. The landscaping of modern mental asylums: indistinguishable from the landscaping of multimillion-dollar mansions.

“Do you think you could park any farther?” Aurora says.

After a five-week stay, Hailey will be discharged today. It’s awkward: Georges hasn’t seen, hasn’t spoken to, hasn’t heard from Hailey for twenty-five years. Hailey knows that he’s coming, says she’s looking forward to seeing him, but that’s not why he’s here. He’s not here for her. He’s here for Aurora because she asked him to be here.

So what’s the cause of Aurora’s sour mood? Worry that it will be stressful for Hailey to see him? But he’s the bearer of good news, and Aurora wants him to deliver it in person. At Aurora’s behest, he persuaded a federal judge to reverse the asset-seizure order he signed the day Al was indicted. Everything that belonged to Hailey, her home, her bed and all her

other furniture, every bank account, securities account, everything except her clothing and her 2006 Buick LaCrosse was seized by the government. Now everything she'd owned, she owns again.

He drops Aurora off at the entrance and drives back to the far end of the parking lot, finding a spot in the shade of a fig tree, parking as far as possible from the other cars. He worries that a careless driver or passenger will bang a door into his new car.

He has about a half mile walk from his parking spot back to the hospital entrance, but he doesn't mind. Sunshine sparkles on every reflective surface, not a cloud to be seen. Soon, however, his clothes are damp; sweat drips freely from every pore as he trudges his way through eighty-nine degree, soupy South Florida air, swatting at mosquitos and sand flies without escaping their relentless dive bombs and bites. He covers his mouth and nose with his handkerchief.

Entering the building, his immediate sensation is brain freeze. It's colder than a morgue in Antarctica, stainless-steel sterile with an odor of ether. What's more, the décor evokes a sensation of immersion in white death, as if he were in a reception area waiting to be admitted to heaven. Every surface is painted white: doors, doorframes, window frames, walls, and cottage-cheese ceilings. The doctor, nurse, and orderly uniforms are all white. The receptionist is dressed in a white blouse, skirt, and cap. Even the carts used to deliver meals and medications are white. Everything is antiseptic white from which, like death, there can be no escape.

Dressing exquisitely at previously unthinkable expense is a new experience for Georges, who's been inspired by the elegant attire of his partner, Hank Smythe-Russell. Georges extra income, really an obscene amount that came with his recent elevation to the uppermost echelon of his law firm's partnership, generously contributes to his clothing allowance. His reward for moving to Miami to manage the firm's South Florida office. It was an easy decision. Living on the east coast, he's closer to Dante, a freshman at Duke. And now that Georges's mother has passed, he needs to be closer to his father, who lives in an adult-care facility in Coral Gables.

Aurora, who exalts fashion over substance, teases him, telling him he's upgraded his wardrobe to garner her attention and praise. And that it worked. But that's not it. It's just a phase. It's fun. Though he doesn't miss the Jeep or his Brooks Brothers suits.

Because he worked only a half day, did not have a client meeting or court appearance, he's dressed south-Florida business casual: no tie, open collar, a tropical ensemble of white linen slacks and a white-and-sky-blue-striped linen sport coat over a white raw-silk shirt, an outfit, like most of his clothing, that was hand tailored for him. His shoes are deep-blue leather by Giorgio Armani with white thick-rubber soles.

Aurora is also dressed down, wearing a Saks Fifth Avenue off-the-rack white silk crepe de chine sleeveless dress that falls to four or five inches above her knees. Her Prada clutch is a metallic deep-blue that matches her two-toned Prada leather point-toe pumps, also metallic deep-blue and white.

During the drive to the sanatorium, Aurora was laconic while George chattered about Hailey. Over the past twenty-five years he hasn't said much to Aurora or anyone else about Hailey, and now his curiosity is unbridled. Was she happy before she was told about Al's crimes? Did she know about them? Did she have a good marriage? Was her high school English teaching career fulfilling? Had she ever asked about him? How had she handled her father's death? Was she still a humanitarian, or did she become a political troglodyte like her father? And speaking of her father, how had he gotten along with Al?

As he walks with Aurora under the fluorescent-lit broad corridor toward Hailey's room, he resumes asking about her. Was she involved in charity work? What will she do with her regained fortune?

"Is she fat?" he asks.

Suddenly, he realizes that he's talking to himself and that Aurora is no longer walking beside him. Perplexed, he turns around and sees her stopped in the hallway several yards behind him, looking at him with irritation, ignoring the traffic of hospital workers passing her in both directions.

"What?" he says, walking back toward her. What was the last thing he said that she heard? "Did you leave something in the car? Want me to get it?"

She says softly but with menace, "Georges Bohem, how can someone as brilliant as you be so clueless about women?"

"After she moved out, Beatrice said in therapy that I was clueless. It hurts."

"Did she give you an example?" Aurora says.

“Eventually, I figured it out. She was Molly Bloom, having an affair, openly. Everyone else saw it. Eventually, even Leopold Bloom saw it, but during our marriage, I never did. She might as well have cuckolded me in our own bed. Who knows? Maybe she did.”

Aurora’s expression softens. “You have a right to believe in your spouse’s fidelity. Trusting her, you weren’t clueless; she was cruel.”

“Why are you pissed off?” Georges says.

“You didn’t warn me that you were going to dress like a sailor,” Aurora says. “Look at us. Our outfits match. It’s embarrassing.”

“I’d take off my sports coat and shoes to mute the nautical look,” Georges says. “But then I’d be invisible, all white just like everything else in here.”

“Damn it, Georges,” she says, hitting him on the arm, somewhat playfully but somewhat not. “You said you were over Hailey!” And without waiting for a response, she takes quick strides back down the hall, her heels clacking on the white-tiled floor. When he catches up to her, she says, “And I believed you!”

He is one hundred percent over Hailey. Even though he hasn’t seen or spoken to her in twenty-five years, he’s kept in touch with most of his other boyhood friends – Phoebe, Ryan, Manny, Eric, his other pals on the baseball team, and yes, of course, Aurora. There were condolence cards when a parent or sibling died, congratulatory cards and emails when children were born, holiday cards, wall posts and other messages on Facebook. Occasionally he’d received a congratulatory call or e-mail when there were reports of one of his successful transactions in the business media or, more recently, after he was interviewed or gave a statement to the press about a high-profile criminal case. And not too long ago – how long ago was it? A year already? – Phoebe and Roger Knox had been his houseguests in Malibu.

He saw these friends when he came home to Coral Gables to visit his parents. And when he did come home after Beatrice left him, he always had a meal or at least a drink with Aurora.

A few weeks after the visit with Phoebe and Roger, he’d gone out to dinner with Aurora when she was in L.A. at a Justice Department conference. He’d met her at the five-star restaurant in the Shutters Hotel on the beach in Santa Monica. She wore an evening dress that was revealing

without being risqué. They each had a cocktail before ordering dinner and were well into a bottle of Dom Pérignon before the entrée was served.

After dinner, they'd walked along the bike path – a winding concrete ribbon of silver meandering like a river from Pacific Palisades to Torrance, separating sand and the Pacific Ocean from multimillion-dollar beachfront homes squeezed together on postage-stamp lots, the Chevron El Segundo oil refinery constructed more than a hundred years earlier when John D. Rockefeller owned the company, and asphalt parking lots for beach goers. Their conversation, ranging from geopolitics to literature, was effortless. He hadn't fully appreciated the extent of their shared interests in history, photography, and travel. They held hands, leaned against each other, and when he'd pulled her toward him for a kiss, she'd tasted of the chocolate mousse they'd each had a spoonful of for dessert. The aroma of her perfume was more intoxicating than the tiny bubbles of the fine champagne they'd sipped until the bottle was empty.

At the door to her room, she raised her slender, firm arms above her head, wrapped them over his shoulders, and their bodies pressed together felt as if they belonged together, enveloping them in a safe harbor of love in a time of cholera. He kissed her once and wanted to do it again and again, but instead he untangled himself. He was still seeing Bunny then, and—what had been the “and”? And he wasn't about to have a bi-coastal relationship—again. As that was the truth, that was what he told her.

But through all these years there hadn't been a word from Hailey or Al. No response to the announcement of Dante's birth. No contact to let him know about the birth of their son, or even Melvin's death. When he heard that Melvin had died, he sent a condolence card to Hailey and one to her mom. There'd been no response. There'd been no note, no e-mail, no word of condolence from Hailey or her folks when his mother died.

It was as if the world had swallowed a treasured part of his distant past. But the estrangement hadn't been due to an act of nature. It was worse than that. He'd told Aurora – and he'd sincerely meant it – that it was just as well that Hailey and Al had extracted themselves from his life. Al was a boor, a dullard. And Hailey was spineless, not standing up to her father. He'd lost respect for her and had quickly fallen out of love with her when Al told him that he and Hailey were going to marry.

If he'd ever doubted his contempt for Al and for Hailey for marrying him – though he never had – those doubts would have been dispelled not

once but twice, each time during a conversation with Ryan Hunter. The first discussion was about Ryan's decision to elevate Al to the presidency of First Global Bank; the second occurred years later when Ryan called to tell him about Al's indictment and its consequences to the bank, to Ryan personally, to the bank's shareholders and employees.

Sixteen years earlier, when he was in Los Angeles before returning home to Miami from a business trip to Jakarta, Ryan had called him. At the time, Georges had been in the main conference room of a floor in the high-rise where his firm had its Los Angeles office, a thirty-foot-long room with an unobstructed view of the Pacific. At the center of the room, which twenty years later would be named for Jake Marley, was a twenty-foot oval birds-eye maple conference table inlaid with highly polished granite. Georges was chairing a meeting of his team, lawyers drawn from the firm's oil and gas, tax, administrative law, securities, and mergers and acquisition departments.

When Georges asked to be excused to take Ryan's call, his new associate, Jake Marley, wearing a single earring and a gray suit, quipped, "It's good to know that an annual high-six-figure book of business trumps firm business."

Patricia London, a junior partner, the faintest hint of a blue stripe in her bleached-blond hair, said, "Rainmaking is firm business."

Smiling, Georges said, "A boyhood friendship trumps business. Pat, why don't you lead the team through the Qatar construction contracts."

Patricia said, "You have time for friendship? I wish I had time for my wife."

When Georges returned to the room, Patricia said, "So boss, you going to tell us about a new matter that will further separate us from our families?"

"Sorry to disappoint," Georges said. "It's just a racquetball date. Tomorrow. Noon."

Turning from a chart detailing the I.R.S regulations contributing to their client's challenges, Patricia said, "That's when we're having the initial IMF and Qatar Bank negotiations."

"Take Jake," Georges said to Patricia.

Patricia was visibly flustered, but Jake deadpanned, "Good strategy. We soften them up, then you come in for the kill."

Georges replied, "I admire your instincts. But more precisely, if I'm not there it will be easier to play our cards closer to our vests. They won't be certain about what we really want, and so in trying to coax that from us, they may reveal more of their hand than they otherwise would."

"What do we want?" Jake said.

"Exactly," said Georges.

The next day after racquetball, during lunch in the dining room of the Los Angeles Athletic Club, its white and green marble floors gleaming, Ryan, who'd easily won the first two games and had eked out a victory in the hard-fought third game, said, "You lose a step, Old Pal, or are you pandering?"

Georges accepted a refill of his white bone China coffee cup and said, "I only pander to major clients."

Then Ryan outlined his plan to form First Global Enterprises, which would then acquire First American Bank and rename it First Global Bank. Enterprises would then acquire Orion Trading, Ryan's oil-and-gas ventures, and his Real Estate Investment Trusts all to be operated as separate subsidiaries.

"We'll grow the bank to enhance our access to global financial markets," he said.

"You're a visionary," Georges said.

"If it works," Ryan said, "in a year, assuming favorable market conditions, we'll take FGE public."

Georges said, "Julian Barnes in our DC office would be an excellent choice to lead the regulatory-compliance team."

"I like Jules," Ryan said. "But I'll want him to report to you and I'll want your team to handle the bank acquisition, SEC compliance, and if this project works out, to handle the FGE IPO."

The men turned their attention to their salads; a waiter refilled their gold-rimmed water glasses.

Ryan said, "I plan to groom Al Rosen to be president of the bank."

Georges coughed.

"You okay?" Ryan said, pushing away his salad aside.

Georges said, "You wouldn't be telling me this unless you wanted my opinion, which is that if Al Rosen is the sharpest arrow in your quiver, then maybe you should hold off on the bank acquisition until you can recruit actual talent."

Ryan smiled. With a little wave of his hand, he said, “Technocrats are a dime a dozen. With dad gone, with Antigone . . .” and his voice trailed off. He was referring to his younger sister, from whom he’d been estranged since their father had passed three years before.

Refocusing, Ryan continued, “. . . gone too— what I’ll get with Al as president of the bank is loyalty and discretion and no one supervising him who would sabotage me. I’ll need someone on the ground, in the trenches reporting to me. He does have street smarts, and he’s ethical—”

“That’s what you have outside auditors for,” Georges said.

“I don’t trust those clowns. Too many of them can be bought and sold. And in the past few years, their mistakes have cost me millions,” Ryan said. “I trust Al. On the football field, he always had my back.”

“Did Al even graduate from high school?” Georges said.

“We’ll have someone in your Miami office meet with him regularly, provide him continuing education, so he’ll know what to look out for.”

Georges said, “You pay me for advice, not consent, but I’ll tell you what I think. I think you’re adopting Al Rosen as one of your rescue-a-good-guy-down-on-his-luck projects.”

“You do know me,” Ryan said. “Following my suggestion, First American promoted him to V.P. of International Business Development. I hear that the clients like him.”

He finally understood. Al Rosen hadn’t advanced on merit, he’d advanced on Ryan Hunter’s misguided sense of loyalty and charity.

In the second conversation, sixteen years later, Ryan was devastated. Though they spoke on the phone, the grief in Ryan’s voice was unmistakable.

“I don’t know which treachery is worse,” he said, “Carolyn’s menopause-induced desertion of the family or Al stabbing me in the back. How could he? Did he think he wasn’t adequately paid? And he makes me a suspect. The U.S. Attorney in Miami has served me and each of my businesses with subpoenas. They want every scrap of paper I’ve ever seen, every electronic communication— Let me read this: From the beginning of time until the present.”

“I’ll call Hank Smythe-Russell, have him file motions to quash the subpoenas or negotiate a reasonable scope of the demand,” Georges said.

“I will not,” Ryan said, “engage counsel to represent me in a criminal investigation. I’ve done nothing wrong, I’ve got nothing to hide. If nothing

else, divorce makes your life an open book financially. But I'll tell you Georges, it hurts, deeply hurts to discover you've been a friend of devils: your spouse, your good friend from childhood."

Georges had taken a red-eye to Miami that night and had met with Ryan the next day, pleading, cajoling, doing all he could to persuade Ryan to hire criminal counsel. It wasn't until Georges threatened to bring Ryan's sister, Antigone, into their discussion that Ryan capitulated, and Hank Smythe-Russell unleashed a battalion of top-notch seasoned criminal defense lawyers on the U.S. Attorney's office.

And Hailey had been blind to it all? Blind to the inevitable grief that would befall her as it had Ryan? Maybe she was an innocent spouse. But at her core, most likely, she just didn't care about the source of her wealth, about the people she'd hurt. Either way, he could never love such a woman. Melvin Levine had done him a great service those many decades before when he'd ripped the winds from his youthful sails, the breath from his solar plexus, his first love from his life.

Aurora stops a few feet from Hailey's room, removes her engagement ring and slips it into her clutch. The stone is a round, deep-cut, two-carat solitaire, a near-flawless diamond, exquisitely set on a white-gold band. As soon as she saw it, she knew it was right.

Georges puts his arms around Aurora, pulls her close and kisses her. But she pushes him away. "You'll mess up my makeup," she says, taking a compact and lipstick from her purse.

"You're breaking up with me?" he says.

She looks at him lovingly, the rancor vanished once more from her face. "I told you, Georges Bohem. You're not getting out of this alive."

"So, what is it?"

She doesn't answer him.

"You haven't told Hailey about us," he says, the tone of his voice lifting toward the end of the sentence as if inquiring. It's a question and a statement of wonder.

Turning her head slightly to the right and then the left, Aurora presses her lips together, inspecting the result of her lipstick repair.

"She is obviously over me," he says.

"Oh, she is," Aurora says. "I'm just not sure she's over me."

The tension in his shoulders eases. "That's a good one," he says.

Four weeks earlier, Georges ran into Estella in the attorney lounge in the downtown Miami federal courthouse on Fourth Avenue, a magnificent mirrored-glass high-rise, the curved structure a letter “S” standing on its side. Estella was talking to a slender lawyer with shaggy, thinning hair and an earring, wearing a red-and-black checkered shirt with buttoned collars, a gray sport coat, brown slacks, and a too-thin tie. Georges, wearing a navy-blue suit that fit as if he’d been born in it, a white shirt, and a red power tie, made a little bowing gesture to Estella and extended his hand to the other lawyer.

“Georges Bohem,” he said.

“Theo Langford,” the man said, shaking hands with Georges.

Georges said, “Enjoying Miami?”

“To be honest with you, Mr. Bohem—”

“Georges, please call me Georges,” Georges said.

“To be honest with you, Mr. Bohem, I’m so fucking busy, working to protect you, to protect us all from critical terrorist threats, the scourge of drug cartels and gun smugglers that I’m not happy being dragged down here for a hearing on these bullshit motions.”

“You could have argued telephonically,” Georges said. “I wouldn’t have objected.”

“Bud,” Estella said, “we have a tradition of civility among counsel.”

“Listen young lady,” Langford said, turning on Estella, “I would have waived oral argument on these piece-of-shit motions. But your boss, *the* god damn United States Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, who has supposedly recused your entire office from this case, calls my boss and says I have to be here.” Langford stormed off.

“Young lady?” Estella said.

Georges said, “What’s he like when he forgets to takes his meds?”

“Georges,” Estella said, enunciating each syllable, peering intently into his eyes, “Why the hell haven’t you returned my calls. Calls. That’s plural.”

“Mea culpa,” Georges said. “I haven’t figured out what to say, exactly. But something’s—”

“Where’s Andrew?” Estella said, clenching her jaw, her fists.

“Billie Bower—” Georges said.

“Billie Bower,” Estella said, tears welling. “I helped raise that boy. How could he? How could he have done that to me?”

“You don’t know that Billie knew that van Keet was going to, to—”

“Rape me?” Estella said.

“There was no testimony, no evidence that Billie knew what van Keet intended to do. But the LSD,” Georges said. “It belonged to Billie Bower, not to Andrew.”

“Did Andrew tell you that?”

“I can’t tell you what Andrew told me. But I can tell you what you must know. Andrew would never use or sell.”

“But he was charged,” Estella said, “with possessing the LSD. He pled guilty.”

“If it was LSD.”

Estella looked at Georges with surprise.

“No one representing Andrew ever had it tested, even bothered to look at the tablets. Gnossos tells me the drugs were misplaced. They’re gone from the evidence locker.”

“Damn,” Estella said. “Why didn’t Gnossos tell me, tell the court?”

“Gnossos didn’t prosecute the drug case. Andrew’s lawyer at the time told Andrew that if he implicated someone else, he’d also be charged with conspiracy. If Andrew were white, he wouldn’t have been arrested. Have you ever heard of a charge of possession of intent to sell thirty doses of LSD? A peril of being young, male, and black in the south Florida.”

“You think it’s different in Beverly Hills, in New York City?” Estella said.

“That’s fair,” Georges said.

“I don’t know a federal or state prosecutor, and I know all of them in this county, who would judge a criminal defendant by the color of his or her skin,” Estella said, becoming too emotional to say more. A long moment passed.

“I have cheerful news,” Georges said.

Regaining her composure, Estella said, “What?”

“Andrew is applying to law school,” Georges said. “He wants to be a civil rights lawyer.”

“He tells this to you, but not to me?” Estella glares at Georges. “It’s your fault we’re estranged. Your fault. It’s all your fault.”

She turns to leave but Georges puts his hand on her elbow and she turns back toward him. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Georges said, "He's not estranged. He followed my advice, did what I told him to do to best protect his legal interests. We talked about how much that hurt you. If he were convicted, it would have hurt you even more. He's safe, in the Everglades. With your mother. Hank will have the possession conviction set aside. You'll see him soon."

Estella's consternation is still palpable, but Georges sees something he hasn't seen before. He sees in Estella a modicum of relaxation.

"She's a firecracker, your mother," Georges said. "She wanted to know what I'd studied as an undergraduate. I told her I'd majored in philosophy —."

"Tell me you didn't do that," Estella said.

". . . So she asks me about Kant's conclusion that there can be no proof of the existence of God, do I agree that a belief in God is a prerequisite to moral behavior? I had to admit that I was a little rusty on German Idealism."

"I'm sure you got an earful," Estella said.

"I got more than that," Georges said. "I got a tutor. She gave me an assignment: read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*."

"The whole book?" It's incomprehensible."

"That's what I thought when I was an undergraduate," Georges said. "Maybe that's why I went to law school. But this time I'll have a personal tutor."

"I have an unusual family," Estella said.

"Don't we all?" Georges said.

Estella said, "The Honorable David Paz is never late." Her fists unclench. "Let's go." Then she stepped close to him, slipped her hand between his shirt and his tie. Between her index and middle finger she slid her hand down the tie. Speaking too softly for the other attorneys in the room to hear her, Georges tie still resting between her fingers, still stroking it, she said, "Why do you always look so damn good? And smell so good, too?"

Georges took his tie from Estella.

"For a scoundrel of a defense lawyer," she said, her voice still soft.

"What is this?" he said jovially. "Aurora Goldin litigation strategy?"

A young man – red hair, bad teeth, bad suit, bad breath, having a bad hair day, and a bad shaving day as well, who didn't appear as if he were old enough to shave, let alone have a bar card, walked up to Estella and

Georges, moving into their personal space, either oblivious that he was interrupting a private conversation or doing so intentionally.

“Hi Estella. Want to have lunch?”

“Fredrick,” she said, “this is Georges Bohem. Now if you’ll—”

“Really?” Fredrick said, apparently agog. He extended his hand. “So pleased to meet you.”

Georges ignored the offer of a handshake. He picked up his briefcase, handed Estella hers. “Excuse us Fredericks—” he said.

“Fredrick, no s,” Fredrick said.

Georges took Estella’s elbow and, as if they were seasoned dance partners, led her in a 180- degree turn toward the exit to the lounge.

Fredrick called after them, “Estella? Lunch?”

Walking toward the elevator, Georges said, “Estella, you’re a knockout.” He scratched his head. “Sorry, poor choice of words.”

She laughed.

“I have few firm rules,” he said. “But this one is ironclad. I never become involved with anyone I work with even if we’re on the same side of the table.”

The conversation stopped while they rode the elevator and resumed when they stepped off. It was ten after nine.

“I’m not sure we’re on the opposite side of anything,” Estella said.

Georges stopped walking. “That’s very good news,” he said. “May I tell Hank that you’re dropping the charges against Ismael Erasmus?”

“Is Ismael ready to talk?” she said. “Give Aurora the information she wants about Ryan Hunter?”

“Why does Aurora have a bee in her bonnet about Ryan? There isn’t a document related to him that she doesn’t have and there isn’t a person he knows she hasn’t interviewed and offered immunity to. You’re not on a cold trail because there never was a trail.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Estella said.

“No,” he said. “But I am on the rebound.”

“That’s a plus,” Estella said.

“I’m old enough to be your father.”

“Another admirable virtue,” Estella said.

She hurried up the hallway and in to the courtroom.

When Georges entered a minute or two later, Estella was already at the counsel table standing beside Langford on the plaintiff’s side. Aurora stood

at the counsel table on the defendant's side.

The judge was speaking. "The motion of Ms. Verus, representing the United States Attorney, to have Mr. Langford admitted *pro haec vice* is granted. Now you were saying, Mr. Langford? Oh, yes. Your motion to have the pending motions denied because Mr. Bohem is late is denied. Get a reservation on another flight back to D.C. This matter is on second call."

Aurora said, "Your Honor?"

"Yes, Ms. Goldin? Ah, I see your lawyer. Mr. Bohem are you ready?"

"Yes, your honor," Georges said, walking to the counsel table and standing next to Aurora.

The clerk said, "In the matter The United States of America vs. Joshua Alfred Rosen, the motion of Aurora Goldin as guardian *ad litem* for Jacob Arnold Rosen to intervene in and to dismiss this action or in the alternative to dissolve the asset-seizure order and cross motions will now be heard."

After the formality of the attorneys stating their appearances, Langford said, "Your honor, foremost among the reasons why this motion is frivolous is this conflict of interest, Ms. Goldin is an assistant United States Attorney —"

"Mr. Langford," the Judge said, "do you think that I don't know who Ms. Goldin is?"

"Well, for the record, your honor—" Langford said.

"Mr. Langford, you haven't been recognized. Be seated," the judge said.

"Let's take these matters in order. The motion of the minor, Jacob Rosen, through his guardian, to intervene in this case is granted.

"Regarding the government's motion to disqualify Ms. Goldin as guardian *ad litem* for the minor, Jacob Rosen, the merits are clear. The boy's father, Mr. Rosen, is deceased. His mother is an in-patient in a psychiatric hospital. In her affidavit, Ms. Rosen's psychiatrist says that she cannot reasonably determine when Ms. Rosen will be well enough to be discharged.

"Before she became ill, Ms. Rosen signed a healthcare directive and a general power of attorney appointing Ms. Goldin to make decisions for her if neither she nor her husband could make them. Ms. Goldin's affidavit states that Ms. Rosen is one of her oldest and closest friends. She's known Jacob his entire life, and Ms. Goldin and Jacob are close. Ms. Goldin is qualified, well qualified to act as guardian.

“Only one of the boy’s grandparents is living, Ms. Rosen’s mother, an octogenarian in frail health. There is an uncle, Admiral Bruce Levine, who is stationed in Geneva. He remains close to his nephew, has frequent contact with him, and he assures the court that this will continue. Admiral Levine’s work entails sensitive national security matters. He can’t leave Europe now, and he supports Ms. Goldin’s motion.

“The United States Attorney for this district has recused his office from this case. Ms. Goldin and Ms. Verus have filed affidavits stating that the attorney-client and attorney-work-product privileges held by the government and the U.S. Attorney’s office remain and will continue to remain inviolate. The court accepts those representations. I could appoint an alternate guardian *ad litem* as the government urges me to do. But that person would be a stranger to the boy.

“Balancing the equities, considering the best interests of each party, the government and Jacob Rosen, the court denies the government’s motion to replace Ms. Goldin with another guardian.

“Let’s turn to the merits,” the judge said. “Mr. Rosen is deceased, so obviously the court lacks jurisdiction over him. Therefore, the criminal case must be dismissed because there is no criminal to prosecute. And as this is an *in personam* proceeding, the court has no jurisdiction over the property of the deceased upon the dismissal of the criminal case.

“Recognizing this eventuality, the government has moved to have this case converted to a civil *in rem* proceeding, thereby allowing the court to retain jurisdiction over the seized property. Mr. Bohem, why shouldn’t I do that?”

“Your honor,” Georges said, standing. “The government’s papers are replete with unsupported – baseless upon this record – allegations that Ms. Rosen must have known about her husband’s crimes. Mr. Langford’s affidavit says that Ms. Rosen is an unindicted co-conspirator.” Georges retrieves a document from a file on the counsel table. Holding it he says, “Mr. Langford authored this indictment. There’s no mention of a co-conspirator. Nothing suggests that the grand jury considered, let alone found, that there was a co-conspirator.

“The government’s Johnny-come-lately allegations against Ms. Rosen are Swiss cheese. Where are the facts that would tend to prove, even assuming a civil burden of proof, that Ms. Rosen was aware or should have been aware of her husband’s crimes? It’s just rank conjecture—”

“Your honor,” Langford said, now standing. “In the civil action, we’ll have discovery—”

“Mr. Langford,” the judge said, waving his hand, cutting him off, “even in a civil proceeding, the government has to show a likelihood that it will prevail at trial to support a pretrial asset-seizure order. Despite the government’s vast investigatory resources, it has never made an allegation against Ms. Rosen.”

“Your Honor,” Langford said, “our ability to investigate—”

“Frankly, Mr. Langford,” the judge said, “your speculation about pillow-talk discussion of crimes is, as Mr. Bohem cogently argues, implausible.” He drank from a water bottle, then cleared his throat.

“Mr. Langford, you would have me imagine a scenario where Mr. Rosen comes home from work and says to his wife, ‘Honey, I had a spectacular day at the bank money-laundering.’ And as to Mr. Rosen’s substantial income and wealth, would you have the court presume that the spouse of every financially successful person should suspect his or her husband or wife of racketeering?”

“If I may, I’d just like to add, your honor,” Georges said, “notwithstanding the baseless allegations against Ms. Rosen, the government doesn’t even hint at impropriety on the part of my client, a destitute minor living with and caring for his infirm eighty-year-old grandmother.”

“Destitute?” Langford said, and the word came out as if he’d said it while sneezing. “Last I heard, Collins, Dickens & Swift was not a charity.”

“It’s unfortunate, Mr. Langford,” Georges said, “that you’re unaware of our pro bono work.”

The judge banged his gavel. “Counsel, you know better than to argue with each other. You talk to me, and only when you’re recognized.”

“Sorry, your honor,” Langford said.

The judge gave him a withering look. “That’s enough,” he said. “I’m ready to rule. Counsel, be seated.” The lawyers at counsel table were standing. A pencil held by Langford snapped.

“The motion to dismiss the criminal case is granted. Further, I see no reason to or basis upon which to convert this action into a civil *in rem* proceeding because, as Mr. Bohem argues, the purposes of the civil asset-seizure and-forfeiture laws would not be served. The court has not been presented with any evidence that suggests that if the property were returned

to the deceased's heirs, that it would be used in a criminal enterprise. Nor is there any evidence that the assets will be used by a criminal as the fruit of his or her crimes." Then the judge said, "Ms. Goldin, have you filed the appropriate petition in state court to serve as administratrix of the Rosen estate?"

"I have, your honor," Aurora said. "I have a conformed copy of the petition and the state court order." She handed the documents to the clerk, who in turn handed them to the judge.

The judge said, "Mr. Bohem, you are to prepare an order directing the United States Marshall to release the seized property to Ms. Goldin. When can you submit that order for my signature?"

"This afternoon, Your Honor," Georges says.

During their one-block walk to their office building, Estella said, "Georges Bohem told me that Billie Bower possessed the LSD, not Andrew."

"Billie Bower was murdered last night, and that's not the half of it," Aurora said. "Van Keet is also dead. The time of each of their deaths is the same. Van Keet was in his bunk in the minimum-security camp at FCI Miami and Bower was found in a motel room in Nashville."

"They were murdered? How?" Estella said.

"Strangled, a deep-purple circular bruise around each of their necks, as if the killers used the same cord to pull tightly, but slowly, painfully, until their eyeballs popped and their windpipes were crushed."

"Purple?" Estella said, softly as if speaking to herself. To Aurora she said, "Van Keet's cellmate?"

"He was in the infirmary when it happened. He passed a lie-detector test, saying he knew nothing about it."

In the building lobby, Aurora said, "The case against Andrew is over."

And then, in a quiet, softer voice she said, "Don't tell anyone. It's not official yet. You're the first to know. I'm taking early retirement and recommending you for my job. I think you'll get it."

"Congratulations," Estella said. "But why? You love your job."

"Because there's a man I love more than I could ever love any job. He's going to marry me."

Estella said, "You're not going to work?"

Aurora said, "Not eighty hours a week. Or even forty. Never again. I want to have the time to make this marriage work. I want to have a life."

Estella's eyes teared. "Who?" she said. "Who are you going to marry?" "After he finds out about it," Aurora said, "I'll tell you."

Saturday morning, a few days later, Aurora met Georges on a dock in the Dinner Key marina leased by the Justice Department to berth boats it had seized. A deputy U.S. marshal stood near a locked gate casually tossing a set of keys into the air, catching it, and then tossing it up again. He chatted with Georges.

Aurora approached the men carrying two picnic baskets. The marshal said, "Morning, Ms. Goldin." He unlocked the gate. "You need help?"

"Thank you, Hassan. How's the knee?"

Georges took the picnic baskets from Aurora and he and Hassan followed her to the end of the dock where a fifty-four-foot Sea Ray Sundancer 540 sport Yacht, *The Octopus*, was docked. The teak decks and paneling and the chrome railings shined.

The boat, its engine, and all communications and other safety equipment had passed an inspection by Sea Ray-certified mechanics retained by Aurora on behalf of Al Rosen's estate. *The Octopus* was fueled, its freshwater tank was full, and it was stocked with ice and other provisions.

Hassan handed Aurora electronic keys that unlocked the ignition via a shortwave radio frequency when the keys were onboard. She climbed aboard and stared the engines.

Hassan at the bow and Georges astern untied bowlines from the dock cleats and tossed the ropes onto the boat. From the dock, Georges jumped aboard and tied the stern rope to a cleat on the gunwale. Then he walked along the gunwale to the bow and secured the bow bowline.

Aurora, using a joystick to control the direction of the boat, stood before an array of blue neon lights, high-tech displays relaying their position via GPS, the depth via sonar, their speed, and the direction the boat would travel. She piloted the boat at a speed too slow to create a wake until they cleared an egress-ingress lane marked by buoys. When they were beyond the no-wake zone, she opened the throttle to three-quarters. The bow lifted out of the water as the twin 715 horsepower, 8.2-liter, diesel Mercury engines propelled them forward at forty-three knots, crossing Biscayne Bay and leaving behind the seagulls that had followed them from the shore.

Once they were well within the fabled Gulf Stream warm waters, a brilliant band of aquamarine, a clear contrast to the greener, darker waters

nearer the shore, Aurora turned the boat until the bow faced the oncoming current. Then she set the cruise control at three knots, about the speed of the underwater river flowing north. The sea was mild, the boat gently rocked.

She slipped out of her blouse and shorts that she wore over a bikini. Georges kicked off his canvas shoes and took off the slacks and shirt that he wore over his bathing suit.

“You checked the weather,” he said in more of a statement than query.

“You bet,” she deadpanned, “hurricane warnings.”

She took sunscreen from a side pocket near the wheel, squeezed a healthy dab in Georges hand and said, “Will you do my back?”

After they were lathered, Aurora lit the outdoor grill and soon onions, mushrooms, zucchini, red peppers, red snapper, and jumbo shrimp the size of lobster tails were sizzling. Georges opened a cold bottle of 2006 Far Niente chardonnay and poured a glass of the golden wine for each of them. They drank the wine sitting in deck chairs on the rear deck, their lunch, a banquet, arrayed before them on a teak table.

“Only the best wine for Al,” Aurora said. “Must be easy to spend stolen money.”

Georges said, “Was Al clever enough to name this boat?”

“Are you kidding?” Aurora said. “Al couldn’t remember the first thing about Florida history, let alone California history. No, Hailey named the boat and Al thought it was named after that Ringo Starr song. What is it?”

“Octopus’s Garden,” Georges said. “What’s the boat worth?”

“Isn’t this the coolest toy?” Aurora said. “It has a Zeus drive system, digital throttle and shift.”

“Meaning?” Georges said.

“Like a jet plane, communications between the engine and the controls are electronic, not mechanical. The computerized autopilot uses GPS and controls fuel usage moment to moment. It can move sideways, to port or starboard. The interior design and furnishing were a half million. The boat? Before delivery the invoice was north of a million dollars. It’s less than two years old. It’s not an appreciating asset. Maybe Hailey will get half that for it.”

She started to clear the dishes, but Georges stopped her. “I’ll get it,” he said. While below decks, rinsing the dishes and cutlery, he called out to her, “What’s on your iPod?”

On deck, he handed her his smart phone.

“You cloned my music library,” she said.

She paired the device with the boat’s Bluetooth. Then a Paul McCartney song, “I Saw Her Standing There” played on the boat’s sound system. Aurora took Georges’s hand, lifted it over her head, turned under it and they danced, Georges shaking, rocking, and rolling, Aurora undulating from head to toe, her arms moving rhythmically with her body, sexy motion without locomotion.

“You dance like you’re still seventeen,” he said.

“You’re one of the few people who would know that,” she said.

“Twist and Shout” was followed by “Rock ’n Roll Never Forgets.” When “Happy Together” – the Frank Zappa version with the Turtles – began, Aurora stopped dancing.

“Tired?” he said.

“Horny,” she said.

He kissed her then stopped. “We can’t,” he said. “There would be an enormous emotional price.”

“You mean feelings?” she said. “For each other?”

“Entanglements.”

“Georges Bohem, I’m in love with you,” she said.

He pulled her to him, unfastened the back of her bikini top.

“Slow down,” she said and refastened her bikini top.

He collapsed into a deck chair. “What’s the subtext?”

She looked at him quizzically. In a graceful arc, two porpoises leapt out of the water.

“The unspoken message,” he said. “It’s pulling me underwater.”

“You have to propose first,” she said. “And you’d better hurry. I don’t want you to drown.”

He laughed. “You’re making fun of me.”

“It’s no joke,” she said. “It’s the most important thing I’ve ever said. You’re going to marry me, Georges, and we’re going to be together always, whether we make love or not. So you might as well accept the benefits with the burdens.”

Georges got out of his deck chair, walked over to the ice bucket, and poured himself another glass of wine. He said, “What if we’re not compatible? You know, in bed.”

She said, “Have you had complaints?”

“You would really marry me?” he said.

She jumped up and down like a happily excited child, then leaped into his arms, knocking his wineglass to the deck, wrapping her legs around his waist, her arms around his chest. “Yes,” she said. “Yes. I will marry you, Georges Bohem, yes. Yes. I will be yours forever.”

She threw her head back, looked into his sad brown eyes. Then she let go, took him by the hand and led him to the spacious master suite with its firm, round, larger-than-king-size bed below the bow. “Why did it take you so long to ask me?” she said.

Hank Smythe-Russell gives a little knock on the open door to Georges’s managing-partner-size-corner office on the thirty-fourth floor of the thirty-five floor all-glass-exterior office tower on Brickell Avenue adjacent to the hotel housing the Chocolate Carrousel. Georges is standing by the windows, looking out to the west over a scene of urban sprawl that eventually gives way to marshy fields and then to the River of Grass. He turns to see Hank in the doorway, gives him a wan smile. “What’s wrong?” Hank says.

“A friend,” Georges says, “a young friend. Abe Demeke. His name was Abebe.” Georges looks out the window again.

Hank walks over to Georges, puts a hand on his shoulder. Georges takes a handkerchief from his pocket, dries his eyes. Then he chokes up again.

“He was only twenty-four,” Georges says.

“Had you known him since he was a boy?” Hank says.

“No. Bunny had. Abe and his brother were like family to Bunny,” Georges says. He walks back toward his desk, stops behind one of his client chairs, rests his hand on the crown. “This is Prince Albert; did I ever tell you that?”

Hank, too large to fit on the seat of either of Georges’s client chairs, sits on the sofa. “Yes, you’ve told me,” Hank says. “What happened to Abe?”

Georges turns his Prince Albert client chair to face Hank. “The good die young,” he says, and then, unable to hold back tears, he sobs. “I promised myself,” he says.

“Promised what?” Hank says.

“Eschew cliché.”

“Heavens,” Hank says. “Why on earth would you do that? Think of the time you’ll waste.”

“There was a holdup in a healthcare clinic. This kid with a gun wanted drugs or money. I don’t think it’s clear.”

“No security guard?” Hank says.

Georges covers the top portion of his face with a hand, wipes his eyes again. “Funeral’s tomorrow. We’re taking a red eye to L.A. tonight.”

“Aurora’s going with you?”

Georges nods. “Dante’s coming too.”

Then Georges fiddles with a toy on his desk, embossed on a side of its rectangular oak base: NEWTON’S CRADLE. Affixed to the long ends of the base are upright ten-inch metal supports that look like goal posts facing each other. Nylon strings attached to the posts are attached to seven metal balls, touching each other, hanging in a straight line, dead center between the posts. Georges pulls one of the balls straight out, away from the others but on the same vertical plane and lets go. The ball on the opposite end is knocked away from the other balls. When it swings back like a pendulum, it knocks the ball on the other end away from the other balls that don’t swing. When the balls come to rest, Georges repeats the process but uses two balls instead of one. This time two balls in unison are knocked away from the others and when they swing back, two balls on the other end are knocked away.

Hank says, “What is it about that little game that gives you comfort?”

“Certainty,” Georges says. “Newton’s third law of motion. It’s comforting to be reminded that the laws of physics provide for perfect order in the universe.”

“For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. But what about the second law of thermodynamics?” Hank says.

“Yes, entropy,” Georges says, “the law that says that without the application of energy everything will fall apart. But mathematicians have shown that beneath chaos there’s order.”

“So you’re a determinist,” Hank says.

“I’m with Einstein,” Georges says. “God does not play dice with the universe.”

“When society catches up to you and Einstein,” Hank says, “I’ll be out of work because then we won’t be able to hold criminals accountable since what they did was predetermined.”

“Beats me why we have criminal law,” Georges says, still playing with his Newton’s Cradle. “Romans 12:19. Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord.”

Hank says, “Estella Verus is willing to dismiss the charges against Ismael.”

“She is?” Georges says. “Damn. Will she drop the persecution of Ryan Hunter?”

“The name of your esteemed friend and client extraordinaire, Ryan Hunter, did not come up,” Hank says. “All she said was, ‘Don’t forget you’re way behind the win-loss columns.’”

“An odd thing to say,” Georges says.

“You think? Actually, it’s the kind of thing Aurora would have said. Fact is, with van Keet dead, they’ve got nothing against Ismael,” Hank says.

Georges walks back to his office windows. “Or not enough, anyway,” he says.

“Of course, there’s a condition to her agreement to dismiss. Ismael has to donate the funds that the government seized to the Red Cross to further its work in Sierra Leone.”

“Are you going to recommend the settlement?” Georges says.

“I will if Ismael gets permanent asylum. I was wondering,” Hank says. “If the case against Andrew had gone to trial, what would your defense have been?”

“I wouldn’t have been able to put him on the stand,” Georges says.

“That’s for sure,” Hank says. “Not with that cockamamie story about orbiting Jupiter and seeing the future in a state of shamanic delirium.”

The men are silent as Georges looking as if he were summoning strength and wisdom, as if preparing to deliver a sermon, again plays with his Newton’s cradle. When the balls come to rest, he says, “You’ve seen the evidence,” authoritatively, as if Hank needed to be reminded. “Andrew Good-Eagle Godfrey was not guilty by reason of temporary insanity.”

Acknowledgments

Taking complete ownership of any errors in this book, in addition to my wife, Andrea Zinder, I express my unbounded gratitude to the following six men and one woman, each of whom is or was an inspiring, patient, and superb teacher of mine and for whom I have the highest esteem for their love of teaching university undergraduate and graduate students. Each took the time to provide me with invaluable written feedback and annotations after reading the manuscript; some read portions of the manuscript several times. Victor Wolfenstein's insights about those portions of the novel he read were invaluable. Sadly, passed before I completed the first draft.

Kip Thorne was my science advisor for this book. He read the passages relating to astrophysics on several occasions as I revised and rewrote, and he read the entire manuscript when I thought it was complete, providing me with extensive and insightful notes and advice. Dr. Thorne is the Richard P. Feynman Professor of Astrophysics, emeritus, at Caltech, and a 2017 winner of the Nobel Prize in physics.

T. C. Boyle, who read chapters as my writing progressed, provided me with invaluable editorial and structural suggestions. He then read the manuscript in its entirety when it was complete. Dr. Boyle is a Distinguished Professor of English, emeritus, at the University of Southern California.

Aram Saroyan, an award-winning poet, and **Christopher Meeks**, an extraordinary novelist and short story writer, each of whom also read and annotated the manuscript and gave me invaluable advice. Messrs. Saroyan and Meeks were instructors of creative writing at the University of Southern California in its Master of Professional Writing Program.

The late **E. Victor Wolfenstein**, Professor of Political Science and Political Theory at UCLA.

Madison Smartt Bell, my literary agent and an award-winning novelist, biographer, and author of other nonfiction books of extraordinary excellence. M. Bell is a Professor of English and creative writing at Goucher College.

Judith Searle is a beacon of literary light for whom I have the greatest admiration. She is an actress, a teacher, a novelist, a poet, an author of amazing nonfiction books. And fortunately for me, an extraordinarily talented editor.